NEW

100% UNOFFICIAL

THE NFL BOOK

2026 season breakdown inside

★ The ultimate guide to everything football ★

100% UNOFFICIAL

Digital Edition

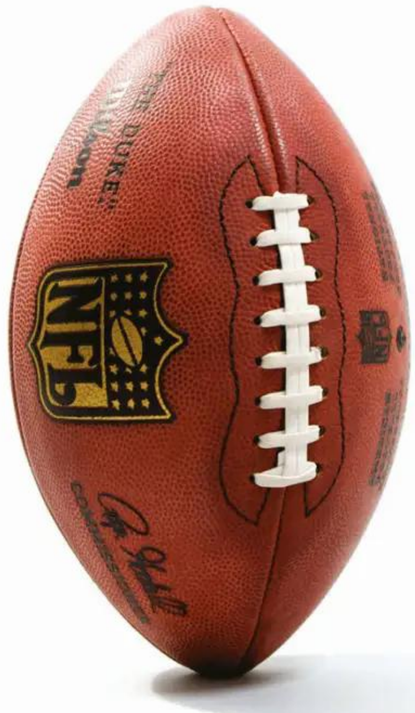
FUTURE

ELEVENTH EDITION

THE NFL BOOK

When it comes to thrilling sporting spectacles, there's nothing else quite like the NFL. A deep sport filled with complex strategies played by some of the most physically gifted athletes in the world, football has grown into one of the most compelling forms of sporting entertainment on Earth. With the incredible drama of Super Bowl LX behind us, the 2026 season promises to be the best the league has seen yet.

The NFL Book is a complete guide to the United States' favourite sport – a celebration of football for newcomers and gridiron veterans alike. Tapping into the league's growing global popularity, this book covers everything you need to know, from the basic rules of football to the draft. It also profiles every NFL franchise, from the Buffalo Bills to the Seattle Seahawks, as well as counting down the greatest players and games in the history of the league. No matter who you follow, there's something for every football fan here.



FUTURE

THE NFL BOOK

Future PLC Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA

Editorial
Editor **Ross Hamilton**
Senior Designer **Perry Wardell-Wicks**
Compiled by **Jessica Dolan & Stephen Williams**
Head of Art & Design **Greg Whitaker**
Editorial Director **Jon White**
Brand Director **Tim Mathers**
Managing Director **Grainne McKenna**

Contributors
David Smith, Ross Hamilton, Perry Wardell-Wicks, Phil Martin

Cover images
Getty Images

Photography
All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Advertising
Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**

International
Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**
licensing@futurenet.com
www.futurecontenthub.com

Circulation
Global Business Development Manager **Jennifer Smith**
Head of UK Circulation **Emma Bone**

Production
Head of Production **Mark Constance**
Production Project Manager **Matthew Eglinton**
Advertising Production Manager **Joanne Crosby**
Digital Editions Controller **Jason Hudson**
Production Managers **Keely Miller, Nola Cokely, Vivienne Calvert, Fran Twentyman**

Printed in the UK

Distributed by Marketforce – www.marketforce.co.uk
For enquiries, please email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

GPSR EU RP (for authorities only)
eucomply OÜ Pärnu mnt 139b-14 11317, Tallinn, Estonia
hello@eucompliancepartner.com, +3375690241

The NFL Book Eleventh Edition (SBZ7468)
© 2026 Future Publishing Limited

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this bookazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2026 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

FUTURE
Connectors. Creators. Experience Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive Officer **Kevin Li Ying**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

Widely Recycled

ipso. Regulated

★★★ THE ★★★

NFL BOOK CONTENTS

NFL: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

10 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NFL
Discover the humble origins of the United States' most popular sports league

14 THE RULES OF FOOTBALL
Get to grips with the ins and outs of gridiron with our guide to the basics

20 HOW THE NFL WORKS
Find out just what makes the organisation that is the NFL tick

26 THE NFL DRAFT
Read up on the event that sets every NFL season in motion

30 THE TECH THAT POWERS THE NFL
The NFL is one of the most high-tech leagues in the world – we explore why

32 THE NFL INTERNATIONAL SERIES
From Wembley to Brazil, take a look at how the NFL has conquered the world

34 ULTIMATE NFL JARGON BUSTER
Know your touchdown from your touchback with our handy reference guide

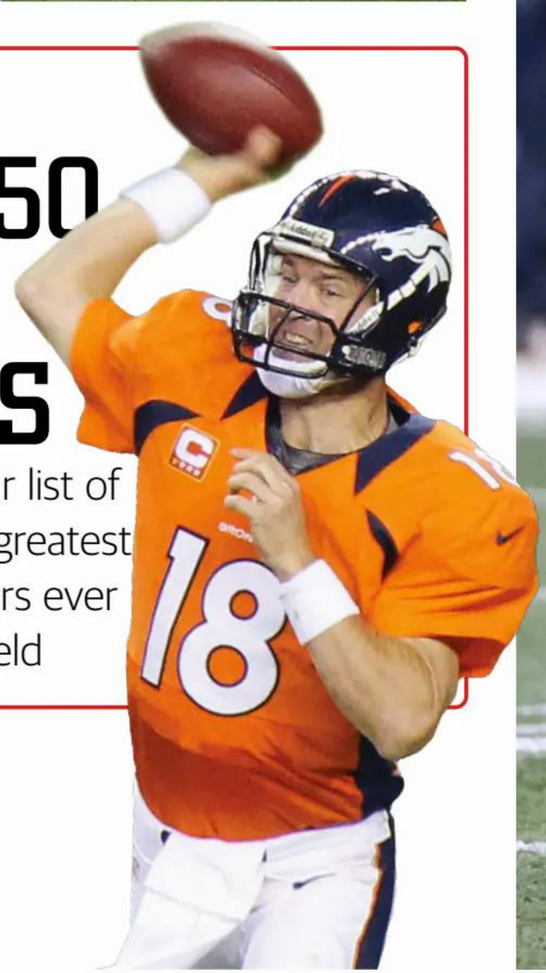
THE SUPER BOWL

40 THE HISTORY OF THE SUPER BOWL
Just how did the showpiece event in American sports first come to be?

44 2025 SEASON REVIEW
Relive all the highs and lows of one of the most thrilling NFL seasons ever

50 SUPER BOWL LX
Relive the Seattle Seahawks' dismantling of the New England Patriots

52 TOP 50 NFL ICONS
Check out our list of some of the greatest football players ever to take the field



68 10 GREATEST NFL GAMES
Count down ten of the most iconic contests in the history of the NFL

MEET THE TEAMS

078 BUFFALO BILLS
080 **MIAMI DOLPHINS**
082 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
084 **NEW YORK JETS**
086 BALTIMORE RAVENS
088 **CINCINNATI BENGALS**
090 CLEVELAND BROWNS
092 **PITTSBURGH STEELERS**
094 HOUSTON TEXANS
096 **INDIANAPOLIS COLTS**
098 JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS
100 **TENNESSEE TITANS**
102 DENVER BRONCOS
104 **KANSAS CITY CHIEFS**
106 OAKLAND RAIDERS
108 **LOS ANGELES CHARGERS**
110 DALLAS COWBOYS
112 **NEW YORK GIANTS**
114 PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
116 **WASHINGTON COMMANDERS**
118 CHICAGO BEARS
120 **DETROIT LIONS**
122 GREEN BAY PACKERS
124 **MINNESOTA VIKINGS**
126 ATLANTA FALCONS
128 **CAROLINA PANTHERS**
130 NEW ORLEANS SAINTS
132 **TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS**
134 ARIZONA CARDINALS
136 **LOS ANGELES RAMS**
138 SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS
140 **SEATTLE SEAHAWKS**

NFL: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

From the draft to the playoffs and everything in between, get to grips with the most exciting sports league in the world

10. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NFL
14. THE RULES OF FOOTBALL
20. HOW THE NFL WORKS
26. THE NFL DRAFT
30. THE TECH THAT POWERS THE NFL
32. THE NFL INTERNATIONAL SERIES
34. ULTIMATE NFL JARGON BUSTER

For a sport that involves so much speed, power and raw athleticism, the game of football is a deceptively subtle one. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the game can revel in the excitement of a last-gasp Hail Mary pass or bulldozing touchdown run. But diehard fans can learn to appreciate devious dummy plays and moments of defensive inspiration just as much.

But it's best to start with the basics. Football can be intimidating for newcomers, with its complex plays, laundry list of rules and constantly evolving metagame. On the one hand, there's always something new and exciting to learn when watching the NFL, but on the other, a solid grasp of the fundamentals is an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to get the most out of their viewing experience. Fortunately we've got you covered here in The NFL Book.

This All You Need to Know section is exactly that: everything an NFL fan could wish to know about the sport of football, the NFL, the draft and more. Here we'll break down the history of the organisation that is the National Football League, its makeup and structure, the teams that compete in it, and the innovations that are driving the future of football forward. We've even included a handy jargon buster to provide quick definitions of some of the most important football terms at a glance.

No matter how familiar you are with the NFL, there's something for you here. It's the ultimate introduction to the most exciting sports league in the world, and perfect for burgeoning football fans and gridiron veterans alike.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NFL

The contrast between the globally marketed brand that is today's NFL and its humble dawn in an Ohio car dealership couldn't be more stark

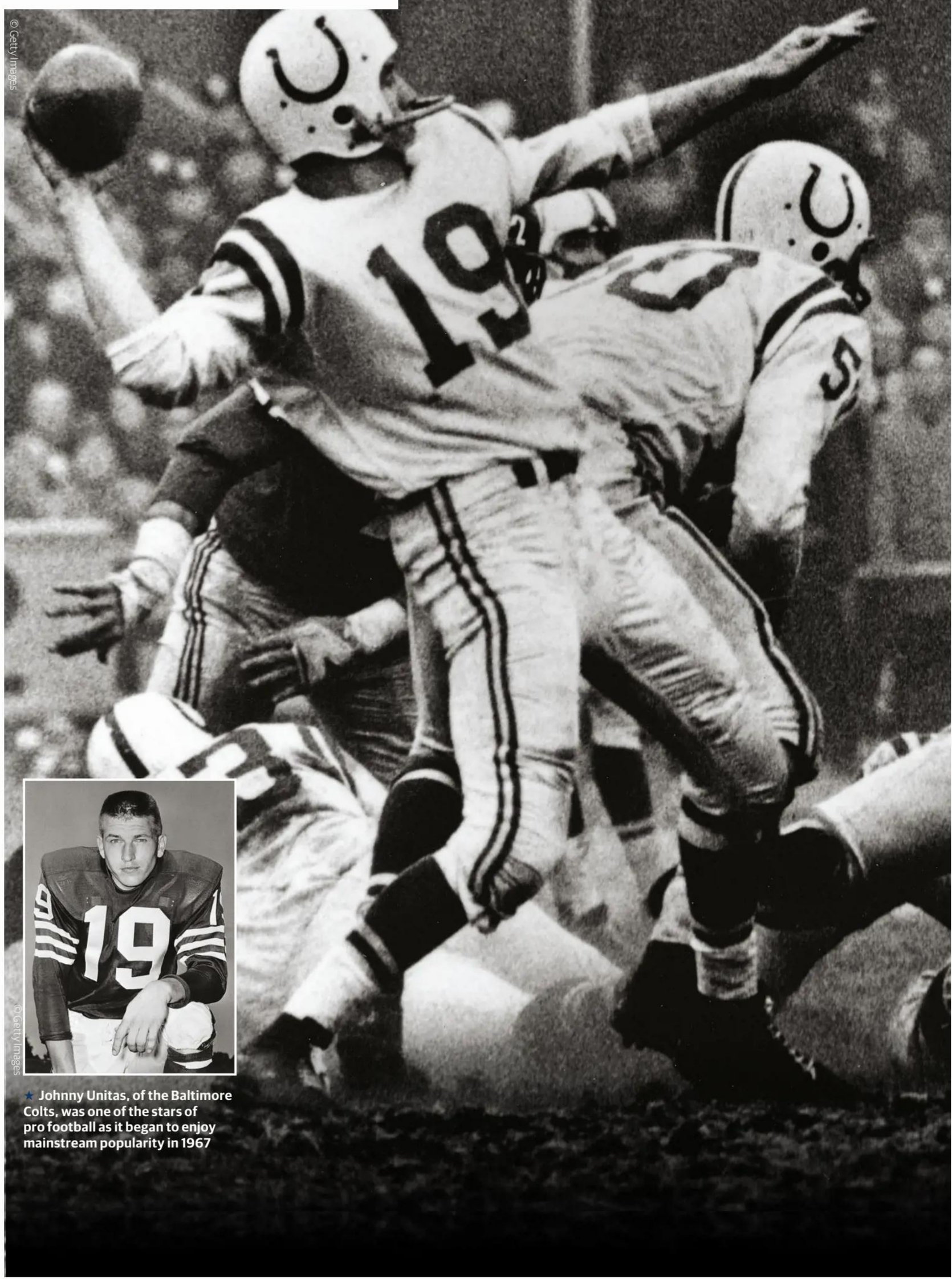
Today the NFL is a mega-brand; an incredibly lucrative product. Not just America's biggest sports league but one which is recognisable in almost every country. But in 1920 professional football lived in the shadow of not only baseball, then indisputably the nation's favourite sport, but also that of college football.

Without a strong league structure, as was enjoyed by baseball, pro football wilted as its few independently-owned organisations – mainly in the Midwest and New York state – struggled to turn a profit. On the night of 17 September, in Canton, Ohio, the same town that the game's hall of fame now calls home, representatives from the 11 pro teams from Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and New York gathered in a Jordan and Hupmobile car dealership belonging to the owner of the champion Canton Bulldogs, Ralph Hay.

Among the men was the great innovator and football pioneer George Halas, whose initials GSH to this day mark the sleeves of the Chicago Bears. In fact, of the 11 teams represented on that balmy September night, two were the predecessors of modern NFL teams; the Halas' Decatur Staleys became the Bears and the Chicago Cardinals would go on to be today's Arizona Cardinals, via a 27-year stop in St Louis.

The Green Bay Packers are acknowledged to be the oldest team still in existence never to change cities – forming in 1919 and starting league play in 1921, while the New York Giants joined the league in 1925. Among the founding members, teams from current NFL cities Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago and Buffalo were represented; though none of the teams are still in existence.

As the men huddled in the showroom, they got to setting out a basis of their new league, a league they would call the American Professional Football Association, or AFPA. The two big roadblocks were player poaching, which had spiked in recent years, and player power, which



★ Johnny Unitas, of the Baltimore Colts, was one of the stars of pro football as it began to enjoy mainstream popularity in 1967

PRO FOOTBALL'S FIRST PIONEER

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - TheRakishFellow

★ **Known as 'Papa Bear' and 'Mr Everything', George Halas will always be known as pro football's first great pioneer and innovator, whose influence is seen in the NFL to this day.** One of the NFL's key co-founders in 1920, Halas was a player on the Decatur Staleys squad, as well as being their owner and coach. He then moved them to Chicago where they became the Bears. Halas was an eight-time NFL champion, winning titles in 1921, 1933, 1940, 1941, 1946 and 1963 as head coach – and in 1932 and 1943 as owner. Owning the team until his death in 1988, the club to this day wears his initials, GSH, on their sleeves in tribute.

had led to skyrocketing wages. There was also the matter of determining an end-of-season champion. The league's president would be Jim Thorpe, still the star of the Canton Bulldogs – although an aging one. He was unanimously voted in by the owners.

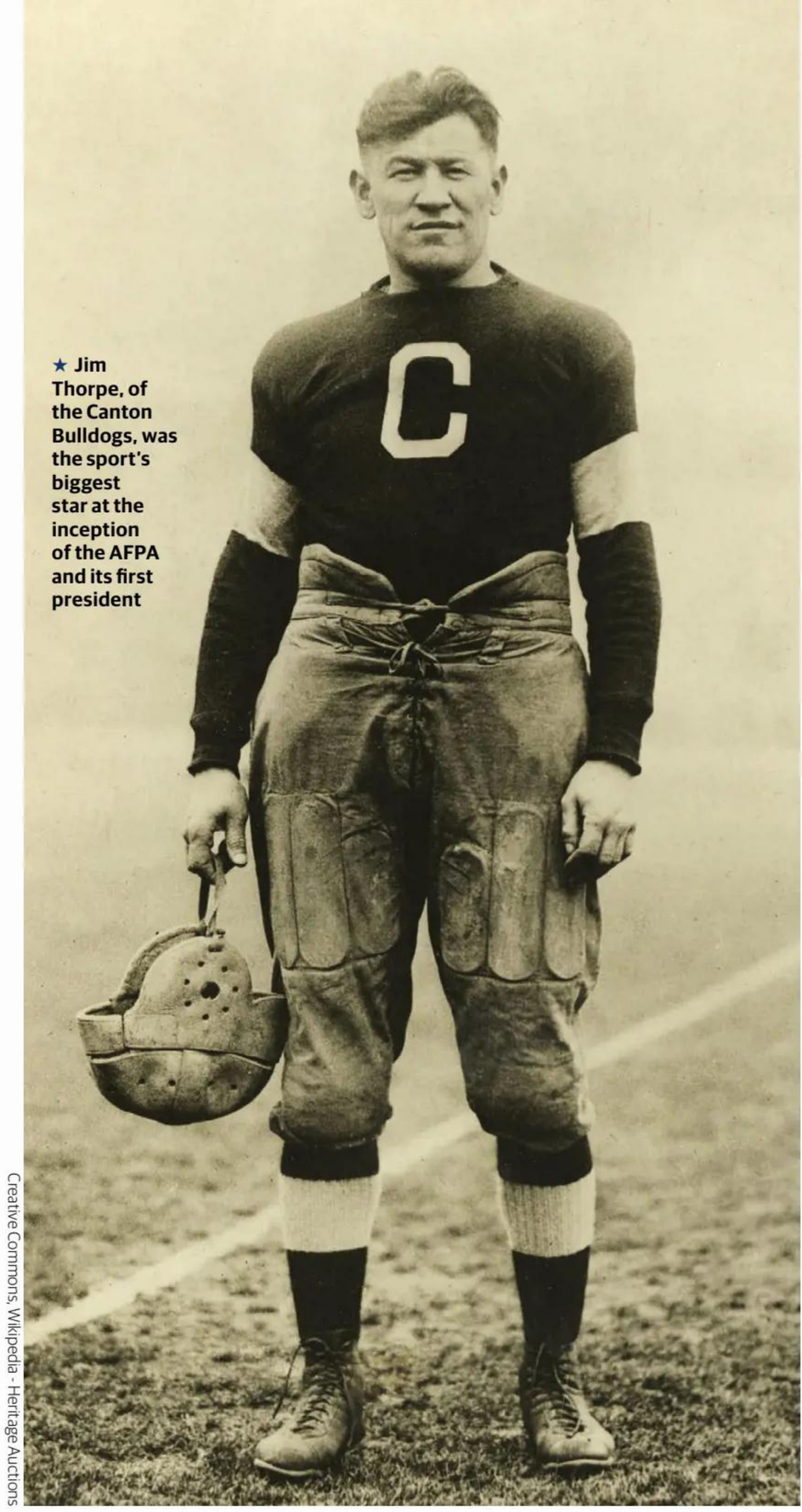
If the inception of the APFA was an historic moment in football history, it was still a world away from what we know the pro sport to be today. Official standings were not kept and teams scheduled their own contests – even against non-league and college teams. The early days were a struggle, both in terms of gate receipts and media attention, and the league was something of a disorganised mess. Three teams joined before the end of the inaugural season and one – the Muncie Flyers – withdrew before the end. With disputes over the legitimacy of such an irregular regular season, it was four months before the inaugural league winners were crowned. By ballot, the Akron Pros were champions-elect.

The nascent league continued to play second-fiddle to the college game throughout the 1920s, despite re-branding as the National Football League in 1922. But as the decade wore on national attention slowly turned towards the NFL. Rising attendances also meant all the small-market teams had moved to the big cities by 1935, apart from the Green Bay Packers, although even they took to playing some of their games in nearby Milwaukee.

Elements of the current NFL began to creep in. In 1936, the amateur draft was introduced and, in 1939, the league had televised its first game – a win for the Brooklyn Dodgers, over the high-flying Philadelphia Eagles, 23-14. But the big turning point came in the championship game of 1958, when the Baltimore Colts squeaked out a 23-17 overtime victory against the New York Giants.

Pro football's first nationally televised game, it marked the start of the NFL's surge in popularity, as families across the United States switched their gaze from college football. The dramatic finale, marked by a one-yard winning touchdown by fullback Alan Ameche, is to this day cited as one of the greatest American sporting moments, and one that helped to shift public opinion.

Besides that, the 1958 championship game was one between two behemoth franchises, featuring a slew of hall of famers, notably Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas. Although business was good – and the league uniquely reigned supreme despite remaining based in a select region of the country – trouble was brewing. Businessmen frustrated in their attempts to either buy into the NFL or buy existing franchises decided to establish a rival league, the American Football League, in 1959. The first season was played in 1960.



★ **Jim Thorpe, of the Canton Bulldogs, was the sport's biggest star at the inception of the AFPA and its first president**

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Heritage Auctions

Public Domain, Wikipedia

★ **The 1920 Decatur Staley squad at the dawn of the AFPA**

While competitors had raised their hackles before, no challenge to the NFL had seemed as formidable as the AFL. Backed by serious investors and having established its own amateur draft, the upstart league sparked a bidding war for the best players, firing a decisive shot by bagging Joe Namath out of college. Broadway Joe, as he was to be known, was a hot pick coming out of the University of Alabama but the AFL's New York Jets beat out the NFL's St Louis Cardinals for him, forking out an unprecedented $427,000.

In retaliation to the poaching of AFL stars by the NFL, AFL president Al Davis, who would preside over the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders franchise until his death in 2011, encouraged a campaign of signing big-name NFL talent, especially quarterbacks.

Recognising the rivalry was mutually damaging, the two leagues held merger talks, announcing the deal in the summer of 1966. And thus the Super Bowl era was born, although the first AFL-NFL championship game was not known as such until the 1967 season. Bart Starr, Green Bay's superstar quarterback, led his team to the first two titles, before Namath made history in 1969, by winning the AFL's first national title after making the pre-game 'guarantee' his New York Jets would defeat the all-conquering Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III.

While the AFL and its teams have since given over to the NFL, both using the name and branding, many AFL innovations were permanently adopted, including a game clock, names on jerseys and the widespread use of African-American athletes.

Since then, the league has gone from strength to strength. Without serious challenge over the intervening decades, the NFL has become the US's biggest league by a wide margin.

Marked by a willingness by owners to adapt the rules to make for a more television-friendly sport and innovations like 'Monday Night Football', overseas regular season games and expansion franchises, the NFL has maintained supremacy over Major League Baseball and the NBA for the best part of 50 years.

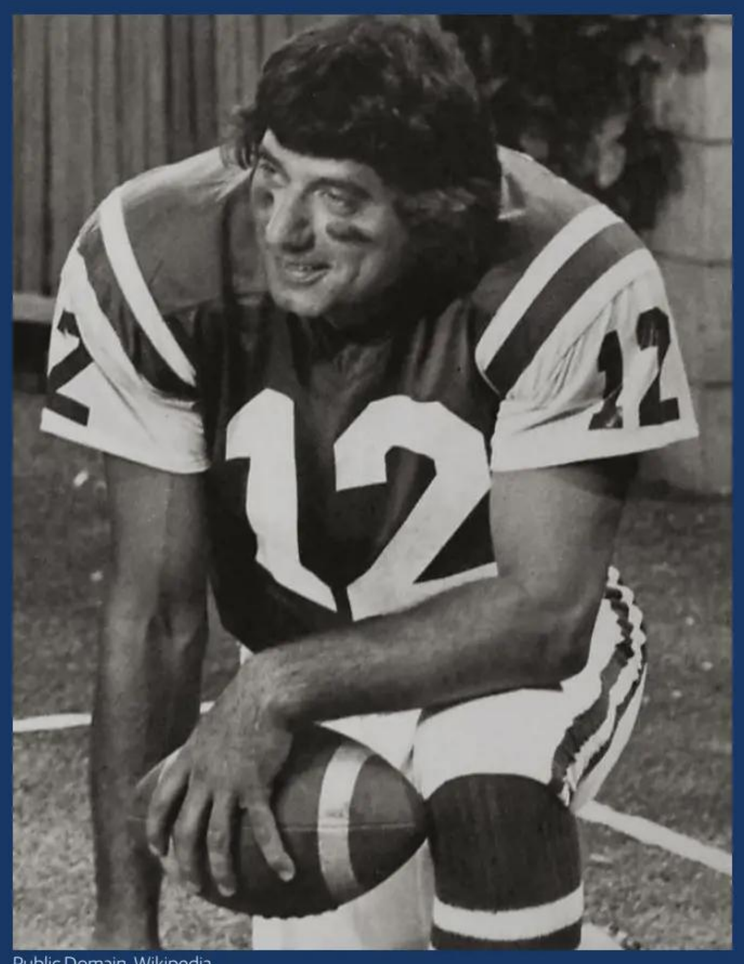
The league's popularity has rocketed to such an extent that the Super Bowl is regarded as an unofficial holiday in the US, watched by close to half of the country's population and garnering almost $5 million for each 30-second TV ad. The NFL is also increasingly seen as a global league today to rival the Premier League and La Liga of European soccer, and stars like Aaron Rodgers and Tom Brady are almost household names in countries like the UK.

After brief forays into Mexico, regular season match-ups have been held at Wembley stadium since 2007, when the inaugural game saw Eli Manning's New York Giants, who would go on to win that season's Super Bowl, triumph over the Miami Dolphins. The games have been overwhelmingly popular in the UK. Twickenham Stadium, the home of English rugby, was awarded a game for the 2016 season, while Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur began hosting games at their new state-of-the-art stadium during the 2019 season.

"The NFL has become the US's biggest league by a wide margin"

This has all spawned talk of a London franchise, which despite obvious logistical issues, is keenly sought by the league's commissioner, Roger Goodell. A team in another country, not least in Europe, would truly mark the NFL's ascendancy from its 1920 inception, when it was a bit-part player in the American sports scene, to a global product. One that is not just watched across the globe but actively supported in all continents – something no other US sport has ever been able to boast.

JOE NAMATH AND 'THE GUARANTEE'



Public Domain, Wikipedia

★ **After the AFL lost the first two Super Bowls, both known as AFL-NFL championship games, the finale to the 1968 season was the first title for an upstart AFL team.** Joe Namath, famously taken by the New York Jets from under the nose of the St Louis Cardinals in the draft, guaranteed victory over the Baltimore Colts before the game. It was a huge gamble for 'Broadway Joe', who was going up against the 13-1 Colts, but it paid off in front of more than 75,000 fans at the Miami Orange Bowl. The Jets' daunting defence held the Colts offence, led by quarterback Earl Morrell, scoreless until Morrell was replaced by the aging Johnny Unitas. The victory solidified the AFL's legitimacy as rivals to the NFL – as well as Namath's status as the league's biggest star.

Public Domain, Wikipedia

★ **Vince Lombardi and quarterback Bart Starr, who combined to win the first two championships after the NFL-AFL merger**

THE RULES OF FOOTBALL

Without rules there would be chaos, and yet the NFL manages to combine both with aplomb

Football is a lot like a game of chess: two teams strategically trying to pick the other apart, each looking to find and exploit weaknesses in their opponent. Although on paper some may dismiss it as nothing more than a group of human beings hurling themselves at each other, it is in fact a thinking man's sport.

Inspired by the likes of rugby and association football, it was the latter that established the initial set of rules in 1869. Fast-forward to the mid-1870s, however, and colleges still playing association football followed in the footsteps of rugby union, mainly because doing so allowed the ball to be carried. It wasn't until 1880 until the laws we're used to today started to establish themselves. Drawn up by Walter Camp – who's often referred to as the 'father of American football' – he introduced the snap of the ball, eleven-player teams, the concept of downs, the ability to pass forward, the neutral zone and the size and shape of the football itself. While these have obviously evolved throughout the years, this set of rules has always been seen as the foundation of the game.

There's little doubt that tactical prowess shapes every match, but everything in place has also been designed to create fast, exciting action. Overtime is only in place should two teams struggle to break each other down, and even then a tie is a very unlikely outcome. It's no huge surprise that gridiron is not only one of the most popular sports in the United States, but across the entire planet.

★ The football scrimmage is one of the most common things to see during any game

BASICS

Fundamentally, the objective of any football game is to outscore your opponent. Each game is contested over a period of four, 15-minute quarters, separated by a 12-minute break for half-time. There are also two-minute breaks at the end of the first and third quarters as both teams change ends. Both teams can also call up to three time-outs per half where the game is stopped. These periods are often used for a coach to reassess a team's approach or give their players a rest.

In terms of the teams themselves, they're broken down into numerous squads with one 11-man team having possession of the football and going on the offensive, and another 11 players, known as the defense, trying to stop this wave of attack. When trying to score, any and all progress is measured in yards as the offensive team tries to gain as much 'yardage' as possible. They do this by being given four downs (or chances) where they try and march forward 10-yards. If they're successful, the downs are reset and a team tries once again. If they fail, possession is turned over to the other team.

Naturally, the end goal is to put points on the scoreboard, and the best way to do this is by scoring a touchdown, the biggest single score in a football game. Achieved when a ball is carried across the opposition's goal and into the end zone, or caught in the end zone, it's worth six points and also opens up the opportunity to try and gain an extra point with a 'point after touchdown' where a team will kick the ball through the goal posts. The offense can, however, try and score an extra two points by running or throwing the ball into the end zone.

When a touchdown doesn't seem on the cards, a team can also attempt a field goal. Worth three points, they can often change the fate of a game during the closing minutes. They can be attempted from anywhere on the field but most come from inside the defense's 45-yard line. To convert a successful attempt, the ball must be kicked over the goal-post's crossbar.

Teams can also score points with a safety, which occurs when the offensive ball carrier is tackled behind his own goal line. Often the result of a team playing far too defensively, this is worth two points.

Although that seems like a lot to take in, it only ever takes a single game to understand the basics and get a good feel for what's going on. Think of football like a turn-based battle and you'll be well on your way.

THE FOOTBALL FIELD

Given that football is a battle for territory as much as it is trying to accumulate points, the field is far more important than in some other sports. Evolving drastically over the years, the fundamentals have remained the same, namely that you play on a grass surface and all markings and lines must be painted white. While many teams over the years have introduced artificial turf, which is easier to maintain, the majority of players think the quickest way to shorten their careers is by playing on one.

The field itself is rectangular and measures 120 yards (100 metres), by 53.3 yards (48.67 metres). Goal lines are marked 10 yards from each end line, hence why the competitive field of play is a total of 100 yards. There are also markings every 10 yards so a team has a rough idea of how far they have to progress to achieve a first down. Hash marks – short parallel lines that mark off 1 yard increments – also appear on the field in order to give players visual aids at all times. At each end of the field are the goalposts. The crossbar of these posts is 10 feet above the ground with the vertical uprights measuring 18 feet by six inches.

There are also rules for the ball itself while on the field of play, a problem that has reared its head in the past when people have been accused of tampering. At any level of play the ball is inflated to 12.5 pounds per square inch and weighs 14 to 15 ounces. The NFL also states that the ball must have a long axis of 11.25 inches, and long circumference of 28 to 28.5 inches, and a short circumference of 21 to 21.25 inches.

It's not essential to know all these measurements when watching a game of football but they are there for a reason. Then when controversy strikes, as it did with the 'deflategate' scandal in 2015, you'll hopefully have some idea of just what all the fuss is about.

"Many teams have introduced artificial turf… [though] the majority of players think it's the quickest way to shorten their careers"

While all football fields may be the same, each stadium provides a unique atmosphere

★ A well-balanced offense, defense and special teams is imperative for any victory

POSITIONS

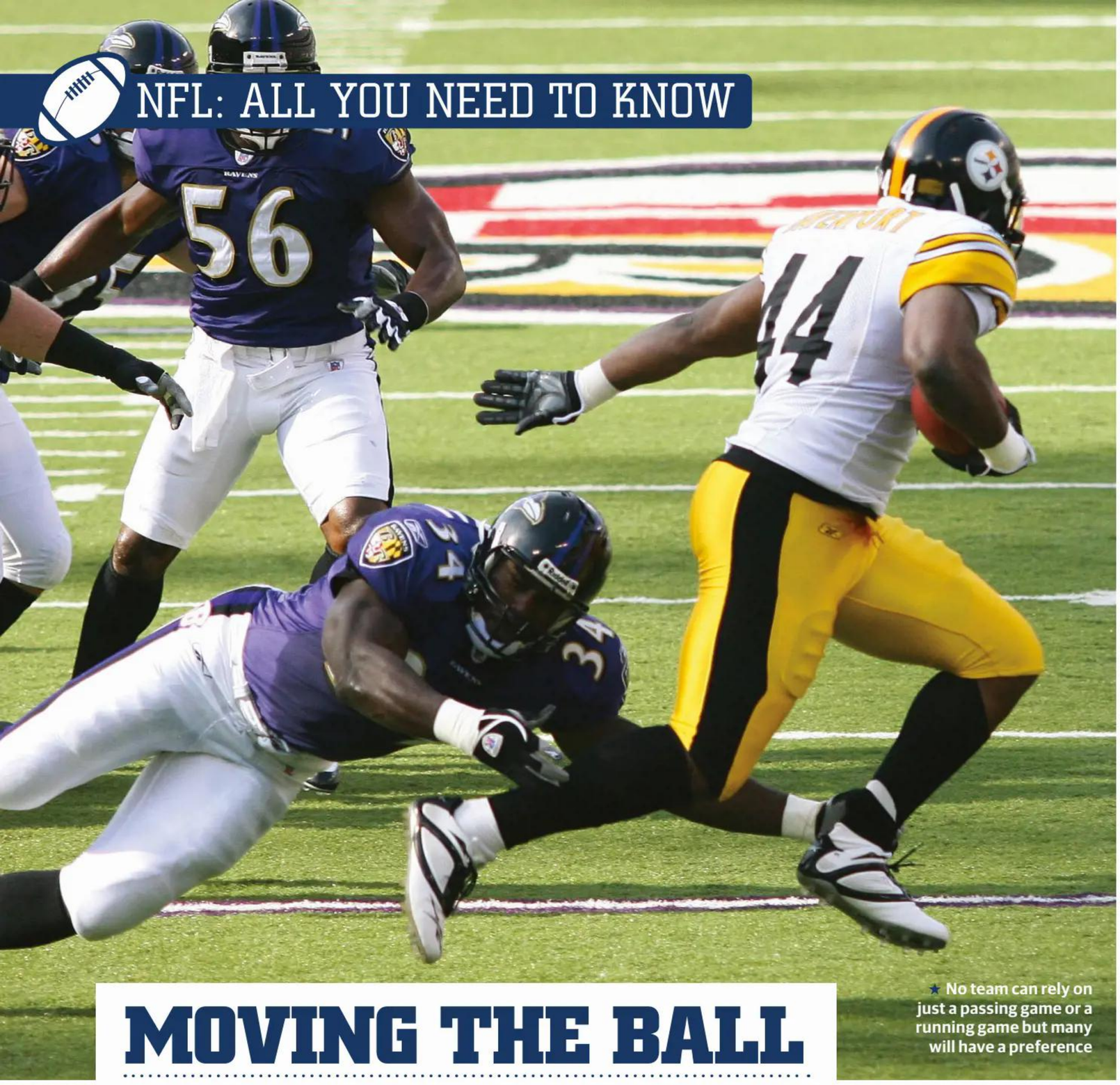
Every single role in a football team is an important one. There's so many different facets to the game that any weaknesses can prove to be catastrophic. Sure, there are only 11 players from each side on the field at any one time, but the squads themselves can be made up of up to 48 active players on game day. That's not small.

Where an offensive line-up is concerned, the quarterback is the key figurehead. In charge of dishing out plays and both passing and handing off the ball, almost everything is going to go through him. Without a strong circle around him, though, the QB will be exposed, hence why he needs to be surrounded by a decent group of tackles and guards among others. An offensive line-up also consists of running backs and wide receivers whose main goal is to gain yards.

Defensively the dynamic shifts significantly. Tasked with the single goal of gaining possession back for their team, defensive play is a matter of tackling, sacking or trying to cause the opposition to fumble the football. Ultimately, however, it's up to the linebackers, defensive ends et al to open up a route to the quarterback in order to stop him making any sort of play. The perfect conclusion to any defensive route is to push the offensive team back, denying them a first down resulting in them finishing with negative yardage.

Which brings us to special teams. While the role they play is minor in terms of the time they spend on the field, it's a vital area that more often than not can be used to win a football game in the dying moments. Used mostly during kick-offs, field goals and when a team needs to punt the ball downfield during a fourth down, special teams are also there to try and block an opposition's kicks and punts, too.

When you're in the dying seconds of a Super Bowl, and know you have a reliable kicker waiting to attempt a field goal, there is quite literally no one more important in a football side. If your kicker can score, you can win.



★ No team can rely on just a passing game or a running game but many will have a preference

MOVING THE BALL

There are two main ways to advance the ball for a side on the attack. The first, and most direct, is called 'the run'. Taking place when a quarterback hands the ball off to a running back, it's then his job to gain as many yards as possible without being brought to ground. The quarterback is also allowed to run with the ball should the situation call for it.

While most run plays require a player to do just that – run – they can be performed in many different ways. One of the most basic is 'up the middle' where a running back will aim towards a hole made for him by his offensive linemen, passing through it into extra space. A much more common attempt is the 'off tackle' run. Instead of aiming for the hole created by his teammates, the RB will look to the spot just outside the tackle in order to have more open field to play around in. All teams have multiple runs that can be executed depending on the defense they find themselves up against.

As you may have guessed, the alternative to 'the run' is 'the pass', which occurs when the football is thrown forward. More often than not, the quarterback is responsible for passing, but there are occasions when another player is used to hurl the ball to try and cause confusion among the defense. As long as the ball is thrown from behind the line of scrimmage, anyone is eligible to throw a pass. Most plays will ask for the ball to be caught by a wide receiver or the tight end. If the ball hits the ground before being caught, however, it's deemed incomplete and the offensive side must try again on their next down. If you want to know what the most exciting pass play is, look no further than the 'Hail Mary', where a quarterback will hurl the football upfield and hope it finds the right man.

TURNOVERS

★ **Everyone make mistakes, but one of the worst that any offensive side can suffer is the turnover.** Taking place when the offense accidentally turns the ball over to the defense, the most common occurrences are fumbles and interceptions. The former happens when a ball carrier or passer drops the ball. At this point, any player on the field can recover the lost ball by diving on it, or grabbing it. Whoever recovers the football is now in possession. Interceptions can happen much more suddenly, when a pass meant for an offensive player is caught by someone on defense. Should the defensive player stay on his feet, he's more than within his rights to try and run the ball into the opposition end zone and score a touchdown for his team. Sometimes the best offense really is a good defense.

PENALTIES

One of the biggest learning curves when it comes to the NFL is what is considered a penalty. Signalled when a yellow flag is thrown onto the field by an official, a team can be punished by losing yardage, losing a down altogether, or having their opposition awarded an automatic first down. On top of that, there are dozens of penalties, all enforced to try and keep the game as safe and as balanced as possible.

One of the most well known is the 'chop block' where an offensive player hits a defensive player who is already being blocked in the knee, and vice versa. Clipping – when a blocker makes contact with a non-ball carrying opponent from behind or below the waist – is also common in most games in the NFL, as is encroachment. This occurs when, before the snap, a defensive player fails to hold his ground. Should he illegally cross the line of scrimmage and make contact with an opponent before the snap, then his team will be punished.

There are also a range of more self-explanatory penalties such as delaying the game, equipment violations, face masking – where a player literally grabs another by his face mask – false starts, helmet-to-helmet collisions and holding. Referees will also keep an eye out for illegal manoeuvres that don't follow the rules and regulations put in place. Passes, kicks, formations, contact and kick-offs all have specific guidelines and any breaking of these can cost a team precious yards.

You can also expect to see plenty of teams fall foul of the offside rule during a game, which relates to players being on the wrong side of the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped. While some movement is allowed prior to the snap, every player must be in place before the center makes his move.

Like most things in football, all it takes is time and experience to start to understand the ins and outs of the game's rules. Before long you'll be calling penalties as if you're John Madden.

★ Each professional football game makes use of seven officials

"You can also expect to see plenty of teams fall foul of the offside rule"

THE PERSON IN BLACK AND WHITE

An official is the person responsible for enforcing the rules during any and all games in the NFL. Usually seven people are used to cover the length of the field, each equipped with a whistle, a penalty marker, a bean bag, a down indicator, a game data card, and a stopwatch. In order to keep some semblance of control, the officials are broken down into categories, namely the referee, umpire, head linesman, line judge, back judge, side judge and center judge. Each of these has a specific task that has been designed so no area of the field of play goes unwatched or unobserved.

HOW THE NFL WORKS

From its inception in the 1920s to the global phenomenon it is today, the NFL has become one of the most powerful sports organisations on the planet

Today, the National Football League is a sight to behold. A many-headed sporting beast with 32 franchised teams spread across the United States, over 1,600 active players at any one time and a divisional setup that culminates in one of the biggest sports spectacles in the world: the Super Bowl.

The league has come a long way, too – from humble beginnings in the 1920s to the grand unification in 1960, the sport of gridiron has also grown, adapted and revolutionised itself over those 100 years. Every corner of the sport has been overhauled or tweaked as fans, officials and teams edge it forward towards its perfect self – ball sizes, equipment types, rule infringements, stadium sizes – everything has been reborn at one point or another.

It's not just a sport contained to the United States either. The success of the NFL through the last century has not only helped seed gridiron as an intrinsic part of high school and college culture (where whole towns will shut down to watch their high school team take to the field), but seen it proliferated on a global scale. Leagues can now be found across the world, from Germany to Australia, and football as a sport grows ever more popular in the United Kingdom as professional and collegiate teams continue to increase in popularity. Not to mention the regular season matches that the National Football League holds in London every year.

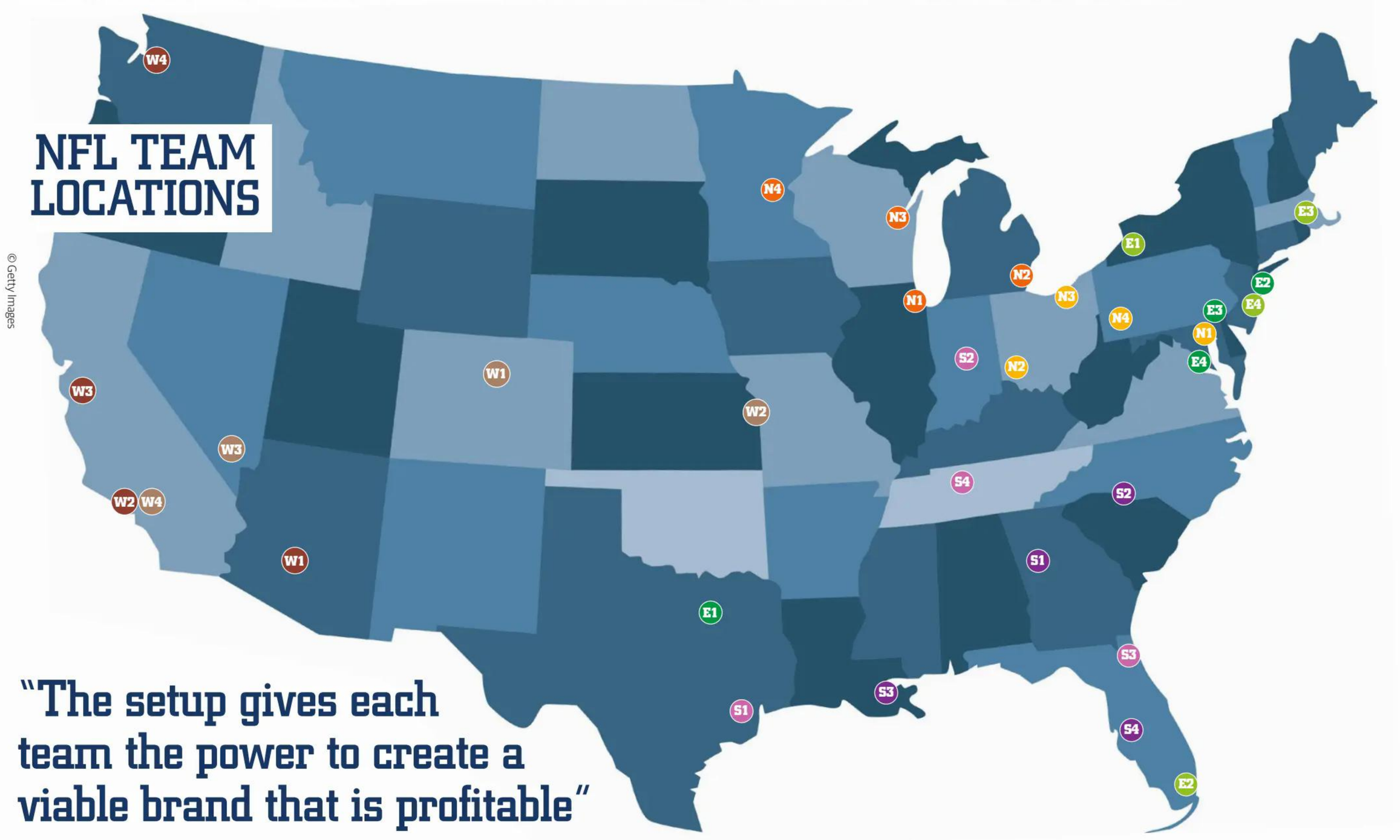
None of this would have been possible without the success of the NFL, and the undeniable electricity of watching two teams juke, pass, block and tackle their way into the annals of sporting greatness. Are you ready for some football?

THE TEAMS OF THE NFL

At its core, the NFL is a trade organisation financed by the 32 teams that populate it. So while each franchise has its own corporate structure and autonomy, it pays a proportion of its earnings to the league in order to fund the regulation and organisation of the whole. Those 32 teams are divided into two separate conferences, the AFC (American Football Conference) and the NFC (National Football Conference).

As part of the NFL, each team is 'franchised' – meaning it has the right to operate as a business in its designated home city and can do so up to 75 miles around said central location (if two teams are near to one another, a franchise can operate business across half that distance). Being a franchise means that team has the exclusive rights to host professional games of football, as well as promotional and advertising rights.

There are exceptions to the rule, such as the New York Giants and the New York Jets operating within the same area and having to share such promotional rights within certain terms, but overall the setup gives each team the power to create a viable brand that is profitable for them, the league and the city itself. As a rule, each team is allowed 53 players to be signed to their roster, but only 46 can be considered 'active' and available on each given game day. Unlike almost any other sport, each NFL team is divided into three segments – offense, defense and special teams (for kick offs, kick off receptions and field goals) – and is managed by a huge team of offensive, defensive, specialist and fitness coaches who operate under a single head coach. It's the head coach that has the final say in terms of player selection and game day tactics.



"The setup gives each team the power to create a viable brand that is profitable"

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	NORTH	SOUTH	WEST
E1 Buffalo Bills	N1 Baltimore Ravens	S1 Houston Texans	W1 Denver Broncos
E2 Miami Dolphins	N2 Cincinnati Bengals	S2 Indianapolis Colts	W2 Kansas City Chiefs
E3 New England Patriots	N3 Cleveland Browns	S3 Jacksonville Jaguars	W3 Las Vegas Raiders
E4 New York Jets	N4 Pittsburgh Steelers	S4 Tennessee Titans	W4 Los Angeles Chargers

NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	NORTH	SOUTH	WEST
E1 Dallas Cowboys	N1 Chicago Bears	S1 Atlanta Falcons	W1 Arizona Cardinals
E2 New York Giants	N2 Detroit Lions	S2 Carolina Panthers	W2 Los Angeles Rams
E3 Philadelphia Eagles	N3 Green Bay Packers	S3 New Orleans Saints	W3 San Francisco 49ers
E4 Washington Commanders	N4 Minnesota Vikings	S4 Tampa Bay Buccaneers	W4 Seattle Seahawks

REGULAR SEASON

Since those early days of the APFA in the 1920s to the modern day NFL, the league has gone through many a divisional restructuring as more expansion teams have joined and the breadth of the sport grown. Today, the NFL is divided into two separate conferences, the AFC (American Football Conference) and the NFC (National Football Conference). Each conference contains four separate divisions, each one defined by geography: the AFC West, East, South and North and the NFC West, East, South and North.

Each year, NFL executives come together to schedule the NFL regular season – an arduous task that sees the league having to factor in every other major event taking place across the US for the duration of the season. Being able to build a schedule that gives each team the opportunity to play each of their required games takes an incredible amount of planning to pull off. Once the schedule is in place, each of the 32 franchises will play 17 games over the 18-week regular season with a 'bye week' (week off) factored in as well.

To break it down even further, each team will play six games against the other three teams in their division. This means they play each opponent twice per season – once at home and again on the road. On top of this, each franchise will play one game against each of the teams in another division within their conference. The division selected changes each year to ensure each franchise plays every other in its conference every three years.

On top of this, each franchise will play one game against each of the teams in a division from the other conference, with two played at home and two played away. Like the rotational system used in each franchise's domestic conference, the NFL ensures that each team plays each of the other conference's divisions once every four years.

The final three games of a team's regular season are played against sides who finished in the same position in their respective divisions. Two of these teams come from the remaining divisions in their own conference, while the third comes from the other conference. For example, a team that finished third in its division in the previous season will play three other third-placed teams that they aren't already matched up against.

THE EXPANSION TEAMS

When the American Professional Football Association (the APFA was the first precursor to the NFL) officially formed in 1920 it consisted of 14 different teams. Today, only two of those teams are still in operation (albeit under slightly different names): the Chicago (now Arizona) Cardinals and the Decatur Staleys (now the Chicago Bears). Every other team in the league today is an expansion team that joined the league as it grew and transformed.

The Green Bay Packers were the first new blood to join the fledgling NFL in 1921 (making it the oldest franchise to hold the same name in the league's history), and they were soon joined by a raft of new teams as more cities applied for a franchise. The Dallas Cowboys became the first expansion team to join the unified AFL and NFL in 1960, with the Houston Texans being the most recent in 2002.

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Keith Allison

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Idibri

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Arnie Papp

★ The Super Bowls have all been numbered in Roman numerals, except for Super Bowl 50 which dropped the tradition to mark the landmark event

PLAYOFFS

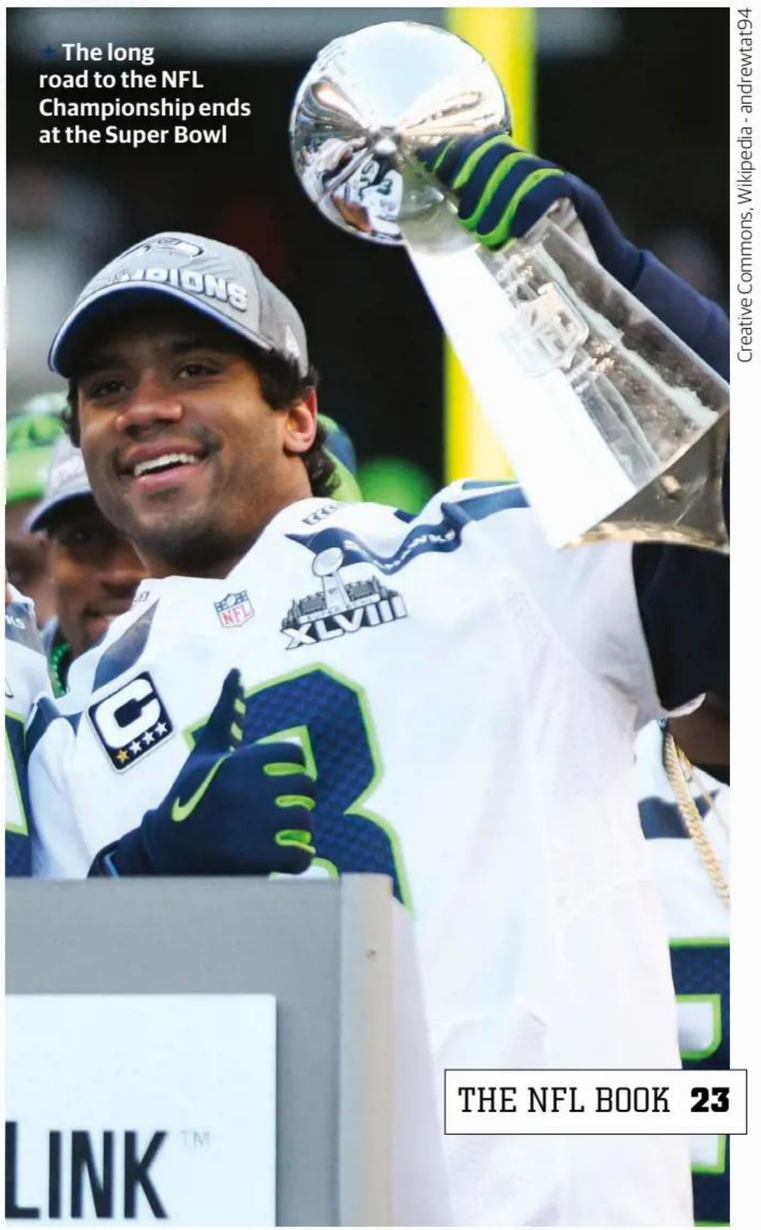
After the gruelling 18-week regular season, the National Football League enters the classic sophomore stage of American sports: the playoffs. Sometimes known as the NFL postseason, the playoffs consist of 14 teams (up from 12 since 2020) – seven each from the AFC and NFC. The teams consist of the champions from each division (seeded one to four depending on their record that season), plus three 'Wild Card' entries, which are selected from the remaining teams with the best regular season stats (these teams are seeded five to seven).

These results also determine who the Wild Cards will play – the team seeded seventh will play the champion team seeded second, while the sixth-seeded Wild Card team will play seed three of the divisional winners, and so on. These games also give name to the first round of the playoffs, known as the Wild Card round or the Wild Card weekend. Since this is a Wild Card-focused round, the first seeded divisional champions in each conference get a bye, granting them automatic qualification into the second round of the playoffs.

This system helps ensure that teams still have something to play for in the regular season, even if they've already wrapped up their division title.

The next round, known as the divisional playoffs round, sees the next stage of the tournament-style setup play out. Now the first seed team will play the worst performing team from the previous round, while the two remaining teams will play each other, with the higher seed granted home advantage. As this is a playoffs setup, the two surviving knockout winners of these games will meet in the finals of their conference, known as the AFC and NFC Conference Championship.

Once a team is crowned the winner of their particular conference (adding a much sought-after Conference Championship to the records of their franchise), the AFC and NFC champions will meet in the NFL final – the Super Bowl. Easily one of the most watched sporting events in the world, the Super Bowl is usually held in late January or early February and culminates a season that began in the height of summer.



★ The long road to the NFL Championship ends at the Super Bowl

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - andrewtat94

REGULATIONS

As you'd expect, the NFL has plenty of rules and regulations to keep players, teams and staff in line and to ensure every action and reaction is fair and above board. Most of these have little impact on the action playing out on the field, but there are still a great deal of NFL-wide rules that keep some of the most interesting and provocative elements of the sport in check.

For instance, the base salary for an NFL team has a cap that began at $120 million in 1994 and progressively increased over the years as the cost of running a franchise and the status of players grew with the sport. For 2025, the salary cap per franchise has been increased to $279.2 million, and should a team exceed that amount the NFL will fine them. Penalties of up to $5 million can be incurred for breaching the cap, so franchises are often very careful to avoid tempting the wrath of the NFL's internal policing body.

Substance abuse is taken very seriously in the NFL and encompasses one of the strictest areas of its regulations. The rules for drug use in the NFL are broken down into two separate policies: the National Football League Policy on Anabolic Steroids and Related Substances, and the National Football League Policy and Program for Substances of Abuse. Consisting of 60 pages of specific regulations, the former focuses on the use of certain 'performance enhancing' drugs such as steroids, while the latter concerns itself with the use of banned or illegal substances (alcohol, marijuana, and so on). For instance, the use of HGH (Human Growth Hormone, the common term for steroids) in a first violation will see a player banned for six games without pay.

There are also strict guidelines in place for franchise tags, resulting in one of the most provocative and hotly contested rules in the NFL. A franchise tag is a binding legal status placed on a player about to become an unrestricted free agent (that is, they can sign and play for anyone). Each team only has one franchise tag per year and it's there to keep a player from moving to another big team for one whole year if certain conditions are met.

"Substance abuse is taken very seriously in the NFL and encompasses one of the strictest areas of its regulations"

★ Introduced in 1993 to protect teams against the introduction of free agency, many critics now call the franchise tag an archaic rule that has no place in the modern era

Creative Commons, Wikipedia, Jennifer A. Villalovos

★ The commissioner has the power to level fines against players or staff who have infringed on the rules, with a maximum figure of $500,000 at his disposal

Public Domain, Wikipedia - SSG Teddy Wade

HIERARCHY

As you might imagine, a sporting organisation as big as the National Football League doesn't operate without a small army's worth of officials regulating and monitoring everything from funding budgets to the length of each blade of grass on the field. It's a huge task and it requires a tight management structure that starts with the NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and travels all the way down to the referees who officiate every regular season and playoff game.

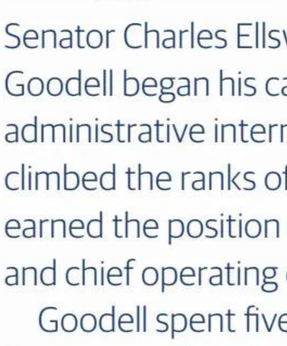
The management of the league is divided between executive offices: the commissioner, secretary, and treasurer. The commissioner acts as the face of the league and also makes executive decisions in major situations regarding the league (such as the introduction of new policies or chairing investigations into scandals such as spygate or deflategate). The secretary and treasurer are appointed by the commissioner and oversee the day-to-day management of the league and the funding required to keep it running.

The running of each conference is also structured, with a president appointed for each. These offices overlook the running of the league, including helping to organise the schedule for the conference and liaising with each franchise to ensure the team has a direct means of contacting NFL management. Despite all these smaller positions, ultimately the real power lies back with the commissioner. He'll be the one who deals with contracts, disputes and more, dealing out fines and helping manage the smallest facets of the organisation.

For many years, the NFL had operated under a tax exempt status but it eventually gave this up in 2015 following a great deal of public criticism. Goodell called it a "distraction," saying, "The effects of the tax exempt status of the league office have been mischaracterised repeatedly in recent years... Every dollar of income generated through television rights fees, licensing agreements, sponsorships, ticket sales, and other means is earned by the 32 clubs and is taxable there."

PROFILE

ROGER GOODELL



Public Domain, Wikipedia - SSG Teddy Wade

★ **As commissioner of the NFL, Roger Stokoe Goodell holds the highest position of executive office in the organisation.** The son of United States Senator Charles Ellsworth Goodell, the younger Goodell began his career in the NFL as an administrative intern in 1982. From there he climbed the ranks of the league and eventually earned the position of executive vice president and chief operating officer in December 2001.

Goodell spent five years in the role before being named as the new NFL commissioner on 1 September 2006, succeeding the long-standing Paul Tagliabue in the role. Often referred to as 'the most powerful man in sports', Goodell has made a number of changes to the league including the disbandment of NFL Europe and the introduction of the NFL Personal Conduct Policy.

THE NFL DRAFT

★ Coverage of the draft is thick and fast with a tremendous amount of analysis for each and every pick

The NFL season doesn't start when the first ball is kicked: it begins with the draft

The National Football League draft exists to inject new life into football before a new season begins. While on paper, to someone unfamiliar with its inner workings, it seems like an overly complicated puzzle, it is in fact a fantastic system to ensure that you never know quite what to expect from a team. A single draft pick has the potential to boost an entire roster, meaning that everyone involved competes from the very first round to the very last.

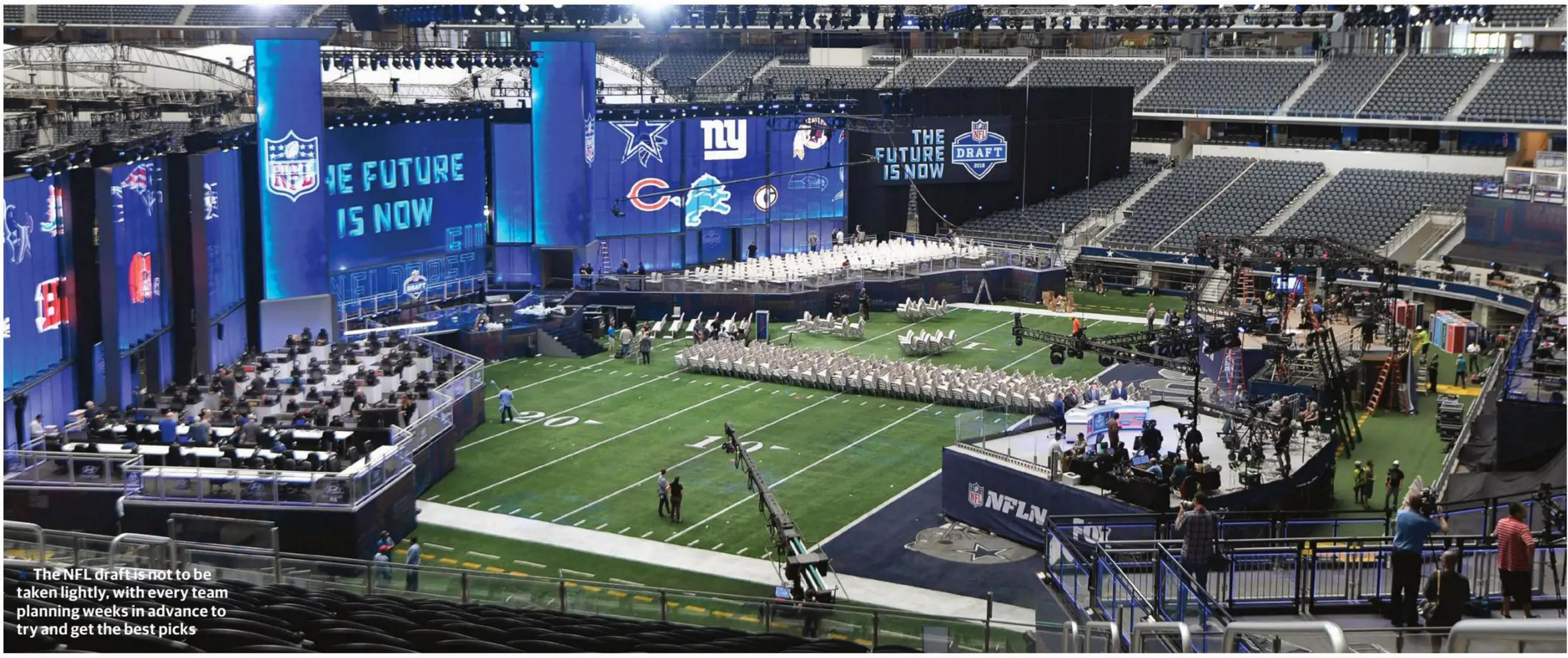
Evolving with each passing year, the key has always been to try and maintain a fair draft. Unlike other sports where the most successful teams can usually swallow up the best talent, the NFL's aim is to always keep both fans and players guessing. A struggling side from the previous season can have their fortunes completely turned around by being savvy during the draft. In many ways, it's as tactical as a game of football itself.

It all starts off with the 32 teams receiving one pick in each of the arranged seven rounds. This hasn't always been the case, of course. The game adapts depending on how many teams are involved with the draft, and in the past it wasn't unheard of to have as many as 30 rounds. Even the most hardened of fans would be pushed to keep up with all of that.

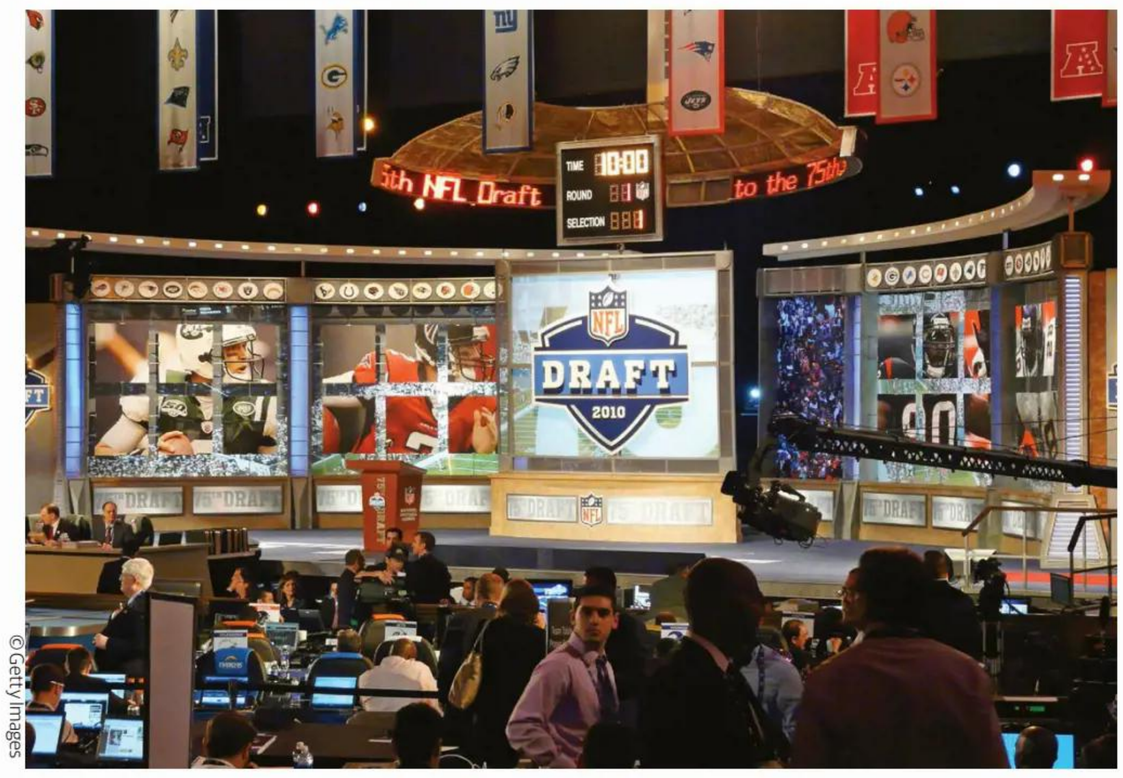
The most decisive issue in any draft is who gets the first pick. Given to the team with the worst record in the previous season, it instantly reduces fears that the side in question could have another poor year – they have a choice of some of the best up-and-coming players out there. Ending with the Super Bowl champions, there's also the opportunity to trade picks with other clubs before each round, should a deal be struck.

From there, a pecking order of sorts is introduced to once again establish a fair base. Those who didn't qualify for the playoffs are assigned the next 19 spots. So if you had the second worst overall record the year before, you

"A struggling side from the previous season can have their fortunes completely turned around by being savvy during the draft. In many ways, it's as tactical as a game"



The NFL draft is not to be taken lightly, with every team planning weeks in advance to try and get the best picks



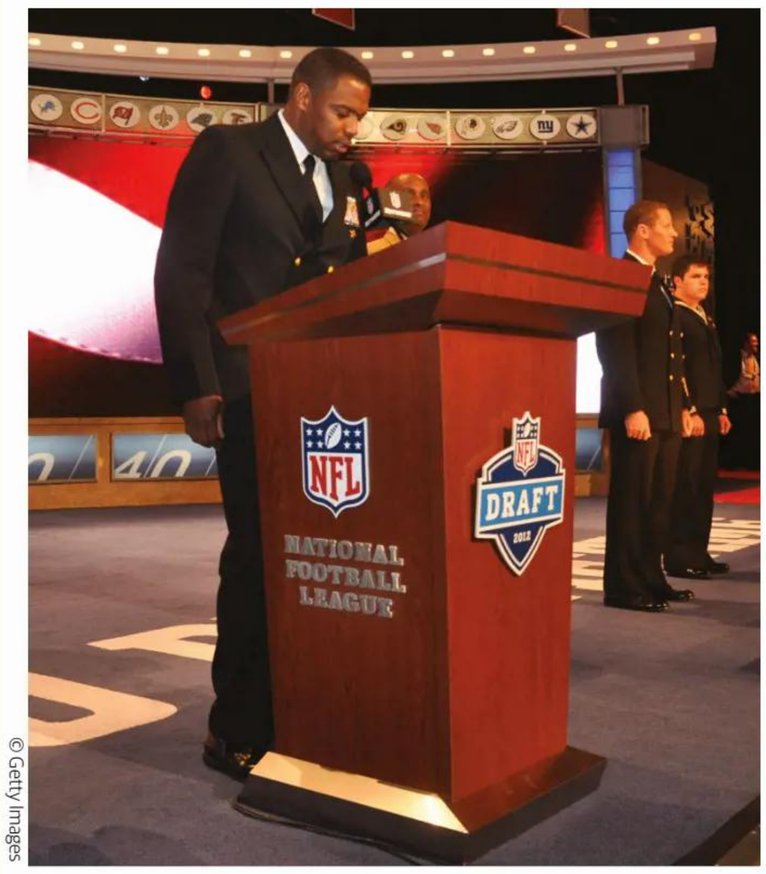
© Getty Images

The draft is one of the most anticipated events in the NFL calendar

get to pick second. Playoff teams are then given slots 21-32 based on how they all performed in the postseason. Being knocked out during a Wild Card game will earn you a higher place than those who made it to the conference championships. Should two teams have identical stats, other factors come into play such as the aggregate winning percentage of a team's opponents. If worst truly does come to worst, a good old-fashioned coin flip is there to save the day.

The draft takes place over three days, starting on a Thursday and going through to the Saturday. You'd be within your rights to assume there'd be some leeway with proceedings, but it is in fact a timed affair. Teams are given ten minutes to make their pick in the first round, followed by seven minutes in the second and only five minutes in the third through to the sixth. It's then cut to four for the final go-around. No team is forced to choose during this time, but going over your allocated period does run the risk of someone else taking a player you were interested

COMPENSATORY PICKS



© Getty Images

★ **A compensatory free agent pick is an agreement put in place by the NFL to allow clubs that have lost free agents to another team to use the draft to replace them.** Awarded through rounds three to seven, the NFL Management Council has also come up with a proprietary formula that considers a player's salary, playing time and postseason honours when determining if a player is eligible to be picked in this fashion. The values of these individuals are then totalled, with the outcome ultimately deciding which player a team can go for. These type of picks can't be traded, and this is where the draft becomes confusing. Thankfully, after sitting through multiple drafts everything will start to make sense.

Fernando Mendoza poses with Raiders general manager John Spytek (L) and head coach Klint Kubiak (R)

© Getty Images

LATE-ROUND STARS

The first round of the NFL draft understandably gets the most attention. It's where the most hyped college players and many future NFL legends are selected, and it's also accompanied by a huge amount of pomp and ceremony. But while the opening picks are important, it's in the later rounds that teams can really get an edge by unearthing some underrated talents. In 2016 the Dallas Cowboys took quarterback Dak Prescott in the fourth round with the 135th overall pick – he would go on to be named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year and take the place of veteran starter Tony Romo. San Francisco QB Brock Purdy was taken with the very last pick of the 2022 draft but went on to become the team's starter and lead them to a Super Bowl the next year. And in the 2000 NFL draft, 198 players were taken before the New England Patriots took a gamble on a young quarterback named Tom Brady.

© Getty Images

"While the opening picks are important, it's in the later rounds that teams can really get an edge by unearthing some underrated talents"

in. Much like the sport itself, you've got to have a regimented plan of attack.

The real curve ball to any draft is when trades come into play. You don't have to choose first just because you're first, and it's a perfectly viable move to trade your pick with another team. This can even see players switching teams should that be the deal that's made, meaning you never truly know what will happen over the 72 hours.

The 2026 NFL Draft, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, set the all-time attendance record with 805,000 visitors attending the event. The Raiders selected quarterback Fernando Mendoza with the No.1 overall pick while the Jets went for linebacker David Bailey, both decisions that were widely expected ahead of the draft. However, the LA Rams made the most shocking pick of the draft when they selected Alabama quarterback Ty Simpson in the first round, despite having veteran Matthew Stafford – who was given the NFL Most Valuable Player award for the 2025 season – as a starter. Meanwhile, the Miami Dolphins looked across the pond and selected British tight end Seydou Traore, a graduate of the UK-based NFL Academy, with a late-round pick.

Almost as popular as the season itself, the NFL draft is a much-anticipated event each and every year, which can often provide the same drama you'd expect from a game of football. And to think – that's before we even get into the fantasy side of things...

2026 FIRST ROUND RECAP

01 FERNANDO MENDOZA | **QB** | INDIANA | **LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**

02 DAVID BAILEY | **OLB** | TEXAS TECH | **NEW YORK JETS**

03 JEREMIYAH LOVE | **RB** | NOTRE DAME | **ARIZONA CARDINALS**

04 CARNELL TATE | **WR** | OHIO STATE | **TENNESSEE TITANS**

05 ARVELL REESE | **LB** | OHIO STATE | **NEW YORK GIANTS**

06 MANSOOR DELANE | **CB** | LSU | **KANSAS CITY CHIEFS**

07 SONNY STYLES | **LB** | OHIO STATE | **WASHINGTON COMMANDERS**

08 JORDYN TYSON | **WR** | ARIZONA STATE | **NEW ORLEANS SAINTS**

09 SPENCER FANO | **T** | UTAH | **CLEVELAND BROWNS**

10 FRANCIS MAUIGOA | **G** | MIAMI | **NEW YORK GIANTS**

11 CALEB DOWNS | **S** | OHIO STATE | **DALLAS COWBOYS**

12 KADYN PROCTOR | **T** | ALABAMA | **MIAMI DOLPHINS**

13 TY SIMPSON | **QB** | ALABAMA | **LOS ANGELES RAMS**

14 VEGA IOANE | **G** | PENN STATE | **BALTIMORE RAVENS**

15 RUEBEN BAIN JR | **DE** | MIAMI | **TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS**

16 KENYON SADIQ | **TE** | OREGON | **NEW YORK JETS**

17 BLAKE MILLER | **T** | CLEMSON | **DETROIT LIONS**

18 CALEB BANKS | **DE** | FLORIDA | **MINNESOTA VIKINGS**

19 MONROE FREELING | **T** | GEORGIA | **CAROLINA PANTHERS**

20 MAKAI LEMON | **WR** | USC | **PHILADELPHIA EAGLES**

21 MAX IHEANACHOR | **T** | ARIZONA STATE | **PITTSBURGH STEELERS**

22 AKHEEM MESIDOR | **OLB** | MIAMI | **LOS ANGELES CHARGERS**

23 MALACHI LAWRENCE | **DE** | UCF | **DALLAS COWBOYS**

24 KC CONCEPCION | **WR** | TEXAS A&M | **CLEVELAND BROWNS**

25 DILLON THIENEMAN | **S** | OREGON | **CHICAGO BEARS**

26 KEYLAN RUTLEDGE | **G** | GEORGIA TECH | **HOUSTON TEXANS**

27 CHRIS JOHNSON | **CB** | SAN DIEGO STATE | **MIAMI DOLPHINS**

28 CALEB LOMU | **T** | UTAH | **NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS**

29 PETER WOODS | **DT** | CLEMSON | **KANSAS CITY CHIEFS**

30 OMAR COOPER JR | **WR** | INDIANA | **NEW YORK JETS**

31 KELDRIC FAULK | **DE** | AUBURN | **TENNESSEE TITANS**

32 JADARIAN PRICE | **RB** | NOTRE DAME | **SEATTLE SEAHAWKS**

© Getty Images

PROFILE

FERNANDO MENDOZA

★ **The first overall pick of the 2026 draft arrives in Las Vegas on the back of one of the greatest seasons in CFB history.** In his one season in Indiana, Fernando Mendoza led the unfancied Hoosiers to an unbeaten 16-0 record, their first Big Ten title since 1967 and a first national championship, becoming the school's first ever Heisman winner in the process. A gifted passer with a large frame, there are few doubts that Mendoza is ready physically for the NFL, but the real X-factor is his inspirational leadership ability on the field.

© Getty Images

PROFILE

JEREMIYAH LOVE

★ **Conventional wisdom says that you shouldn't draft a running back with a top-five pick.** It's a testament to Jeremiyah Love's talent that no one was making that argument when the Cardinals selected him third overall. Love was unplayable in his two starting years for Notre Dame, averaging almost seven yards per carry and notching more than 40 total touchdowns. Dynamic, durable and adept both out of the backfield and as a receiver, he'll become the focal point for Arizona's new-look offense. Expect an instant impact in his debut NFL season.

THE TECH THAT POWERS THE NFL

The NFL can legitimately claim to be the world's most high-tech sports league

THE WORLD'S MOST EXTENSIVE AV SUITES

A lot of people watch the NFL. A lot. So broadcasters around the world can't afford any slip ups. Thankfully, they have the technology in place to make sure every moment on the field is captured. Levi's Stadium's Sony-supplied AV set up is one of the world's most advanced and comprehensive. Featuring more than 2,200 LCD displays, it helps ensure that no detail is missed, no matter how small.

GIGANTIC HD SCOREBOARDS

In the NFL, bigger is better, and that applies to scoreboards too. The screen in Levi's Stadium, for example, stands at a mammoth 61 metres by 15 metres – and it's not even the largest in the league. It uses an innovative combination of traditional and transparent display technology, and displays with the help of over five million individual LEDs.

RETRACTABLE GRASS TO KEEP THE PLAYING FIELD FRESH

Though not yet installed at every NFL stadium, retractable grass is a key feature in some, notably the University of Phoenix Stadium in Arizona. A 200-foot opening lets the turf slide out from the Cardinals' home stadium when it's not in use, enabling it to be more easily tended.

While some sports and professional leagues around the world have been resistant to change and wary of new technologies, the same can't be said for the NFL. Throughout its history, the league has consistently been on the cutting edge of sporting innovation, a practice that continues to this day.

An instant replay system was first introduced to the NFL all the way back in 1986, while the current version of the tech was implemented in 1999 – allowing teams to challenge on-field rulings with video evidence should they choose. The technology available to players on the field has evolved significantly in recent years as well. While in the early days of the NFL, players would converse on the touchline with their coaching staff before carrying out plays, now the advent of built-in headsets means that offenses and defenses can adjust their positions and strategies instantaneously.

An array of sensors now track almost every physical statistic under the sun, with players and coaches able to review their movements with an unprecedented degree of precision. All of which means that analytics are more important in the NFL than ever. With new technology comes innovative new ways of playing the game, and the league's smartest teams are making good use of these advancements. Having a wealth of data on tap might not win games in itself, but it can certainly give teams an edge.

STATE-OF-THE-ART SECURITY SYSTEMS

With NFL games being among the world's most high-profile sporting events, no expense is spared on the custom security systems installed at each of the league's venues. For Super Bowl 50, held at Levi's Stadium, the NFL, police, Valley Transportation Authority and stadium staff were all linked through a brand new command post, enabling them to coordinate responses to any threats.

A FLOATING CAMERA THAT FLIES ABOVE THE GAME

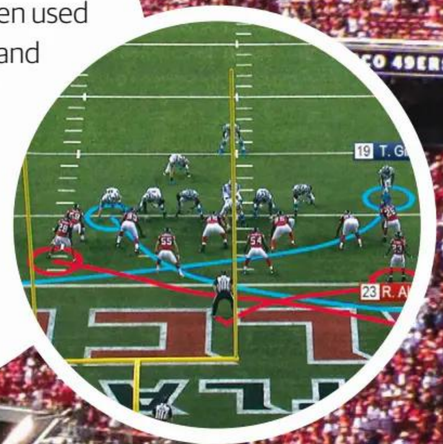
Skycam is a familiar sight at many major sporting events nowadays, but it doesn't make the flying camera any less spectacular from a tech point of view. Four steel cables, motors and a gyroscope let the Skycam swoop and plunge across the whole field of play, combining close ups with wide pans for some breathtaking NFL footage.

HEADSETS THAT PROVIDE A SECURE AUDIO LINK

Originally limited to just the quarterback, every player on the field now has radio access to their coaching staff built into their helmets. This way coaches can dictate plays and converse with their signal callers on a fully secure line. This privacy is a crucial factor when trying to outfox the opposition.

MOTION SENSORS TO TRACK PLAYERS

Zebra Technologies' sensors have been used in the NFL for a number of years now, and they're getting more advanced every year. The tiny RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) chips sit in players' shoulder pads and deliver vital speed, distance and impact data to coaches and analysts on the field with minimal lag (just half a second).



SURFACE TABLETS THAT DISPLAY AN INTERACTIVE PLAYBOOK

Since signing a $400 million deal with the NFL in 2013, Microsoft's Surface tablets have been integrated into game day preparations. Whether used to map out routes or review plays, the devices are ubiquitous throughout the league – even if announcers can't stop calling them iPads.

THE NFL INTERNATIONAL SERIES

One of the big knocks on American sports is how insular they can be. So how did football become a global game?

For years the rest of the world has pointed out, with much glee, that Americans are the only sports fans on Earth to crown the winners of their national competitions as 'world champions'. Baseball's winner-takes-all grand finale, the World Series, is another prime example. But, with football at least, that joke doesn't really ring true any more.

By the close of the 2024 season, 48 NFL regular season games have been played under the 'International Series' banner around the world, with more scheduled for seasons to come. In addition to the International Series games, regular and pre-season matches have taken place in Canada, along with dozens of exhibition games in Japan, the UK, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Ireland and Australia.

Such is the optimism around the sport in the UK that Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur designed its new 62,000-seater stadium to accommodate multiple NFL regular season games each year, with the hope of pocketing the huge cash windfall that comes with them. Next to the other traditional 'Big Four', football is by far the most widely exported sport. So how did we get here?

The league's first concerted effort – and its first big investment – into markets outside the US was the World League of American Football (WLAF), later renamed NFL Europe and then NFL Europa.

★ The old Wembley Stadium in northwest London played host to the WLAF's first World Bowl in 1991

It was a spring league played by teams based – at various times – in Canada, the US, the UK, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands.

The objective was two-fold: to export NFL-branded pro football to European audiences and also to provide a format for younger and 'developmental' players to get more game time – much like the NBA's Summer League. The WLAF/NFL Europe ran with varying degrees of success from 1991 until 2007, at which point the focus of how the league would try to capture foreign audiences was shifting. In 2005 the league played its first regular season game abroad, a match-up between the Arizona Cardinals and the San Francisco 49ers, won by the Cardinals 31-14, in Mexico City's gargantuan Estadio Azteca. The game's attendance of more than 103,000 was, at the time, the largest ever in the NFL.

It wasn't the birth of the International Series, however, because it was played under the banner of NFL Futbol Americano. Mexico City would have to wait until the Oakland Raiders'

"Expanding the sport overseas – and especially to the United Kingdom – has been a priority of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's"

Tottenham Hotspur's new stadium hosted two London games in 2019 for the first time

victory over the Houston Texans at the Azteca in November 2016 to get their first 'International Series' fix.

Expanding the sport overseas – and especially to the United Kingdom – has been a priority of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's, with the league's overseer having repeatedly floated ideas such as a London franchise, a Wembley Super Bowl and additional games in the regular season for each team, with a number played on the same weekend outside the United States.

As the most fully realised of these proposals to date, the NFL International Series has been an unequivocal success. The first game was played between the New York Giants (who would go on to win that season's Super Bowl against a then-undefeated New England Patriots team) and the Miami Dolphins. Constant drizzle on the day combined with a dreadful game made for a less-than-compelling spectacle in which Eli Manning ran in the only touchdown.

Not that it mattered in the end, as the British crowds turned out in droves. More games were commissioned, with big name players like Tom Brady gracing the Wembley turf in the following years, and multiple games have been awarded to the UK from 2013 onwards. Twickenham also hosted games between 2016 and 2018, and from 2019 London games have had a new co-host in the Tottenham Hotspur stadium, which began with the Oakland Raiders' win over the Chicago Bears in 2019.

Germany hosted its inaugural NFL regular season game in 2022 at Munich's Allianz Arena, bringing competitive football to mainland Europe for the first time and marking another milestone in the league's global expansion. Frankfurt and Berlin have also held games, with the league's German presence skyrocketing in recent years. And it's not stopping there. Brazil welcomed the NFL for the first time in 2024, and in 2025 the league debuted in both Madrid and Dublin, adding Spain and Ireland to its ever-growing list of international destinations.

The prospect of a permanent London franchise – as impractical as it sounds – is also still very much alive and well. Long backed by Goodell, it would, in all likelihood, see one of the lower-attended NFL franchises relocate to the UK capital. The Jaguars have long been mooted. Should that happen, it would mark the moment pro football truly became a global sport.

THE NFL GOES DOWN UNDER

★ **A record nine regular season NFL games will take place overseas in 2026.** In addition to returning fixtures in the UK, Germany, Spain, Brazil and Mexico, the league will make its debut in France, at the Stade de France in Paris, and Australia. The iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground will see the Rams and 49ers face off on 11 September, with Oceania becoming the fourth continent to host NFL action. The game will play out on the Friday of Week 1 in order to mitigate the huge travel distance and time differences.

© Getty Images

ULTIMATE NFL JARGON BUSTER

If you don't know your touchdown from your touchback then you've come to the right place

★ A group of referees bring out the chains to see if the attacking team has reached the first down marker

AUDIBLE

Before a play begins, the quarterback will survey the defense's formation. If he decides to change the play, a new play – an audible – will be communicated to his team through pre-determined code words.

BACKFIELD

The area behind the line of scrimmage where the quarterback and any running backs line up before the play commences. A team's unit of running backs may also be referred to as a 'the backfield'.

BLITZ

A defense will split between attempting to put pressure on the quarterback and covering his pass. Players running at the quarterback are called blitzers and a play with more of them is called a blitz.

BLOCKING

Blocking is a crucial part of the football game. Linemen, or sometimes wide receivers, will stop the tacklers from getting to the ball-carrier. Multiple blockers can create holes through which a back can burst.

CENTER

The center plays at the middle of the offensive line and starts most plays at the line of scrimmage either by passing the ball back or flicking it several yards between his legs to the quarterback.

CHAINS

The first down marker on the sideline is attached to a ten-yard chain, the beginning of which is placed at the spot of the ball every time a first down is achieved.

CHALLENGE

If a coach disagrees with a referee's decision, he can ask for a video replay review. A coach is allowed two challenges per game, and a third if both of the first two are successful.

COMMISSIONER

The current NFL commissioner is Roger Goodell. As well as being the final authority in football, he is the public face of the league and is in charge of expanding and running the business.

COMPLETION

When a quarterback throws to his receiver, if they catch it cleanly in the field of play, it is ruled complete. Challenges are often used on whether a pass is complete or not.

CONFERENCE

The NFL is split into two halves, the American Football Conference (AFC) and National Football Conference (NFC). The playoffs are played within these conferences and the champion of each contest the Super Bowl.

COORDINATOR

A team will generally be run by the head coach, below which work an offensive coordinator and a defensive coordinator. Depending on the coach, the OC and DC may call plays as well.

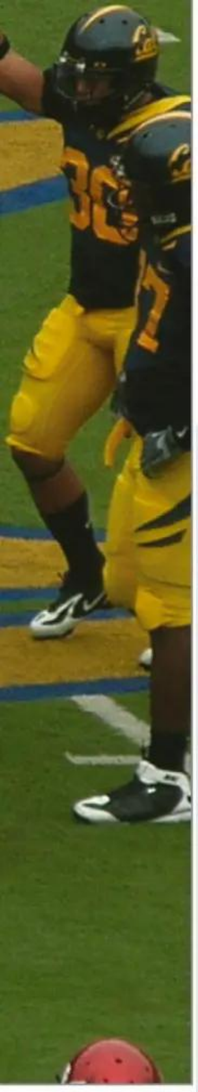
CORNERBACK

Cornerbacks are often the fastest players active on the football pitch. Their job is to track wide receivers as they run down field and if possible intercept any passes thrown their way.

DEFENSIVE END

A defensive end lines up at the line of scrimmage and their job is to get to the quarterback for a sack or attempt to tackle running back.

★ Aaron Rodgers of the Green Bay Packers awaits the snap with a running back and a fullback in the backfield



DIVISION

Within the conferences, there are four loosely geographical divisions. Each team plays its divisional rivals twice a season and the winner of each division automatically qualifies for the playoffs.

DOWN

The basic aim of football is to move the ball ten yards in four attempts, otherwise known as downs. A failure to reach the ten yards on fourth down sees the ball turned over to the other team.

END ZONE

This is where touchdowns are scored. It is ten yards deep and extends the entire width of the pitch. If the ball is kicked through it (but not the posts) then a touchback is declared.

EXTRA POINT

After a touchdown, a team can kick a 33-yard field goal for the extra point or go for two points at the two-yard line with one attempt to get into the end zone.

FALSE START

One of the most common penalties, a false start is called when an offensive player moves before the ball is snapped.

FIELD GOAL

Apart from a touchdown, the other most common way to score points in football is by kicking the ball through the posts. It is often on these kicks that the closest games are decided.

FLAG

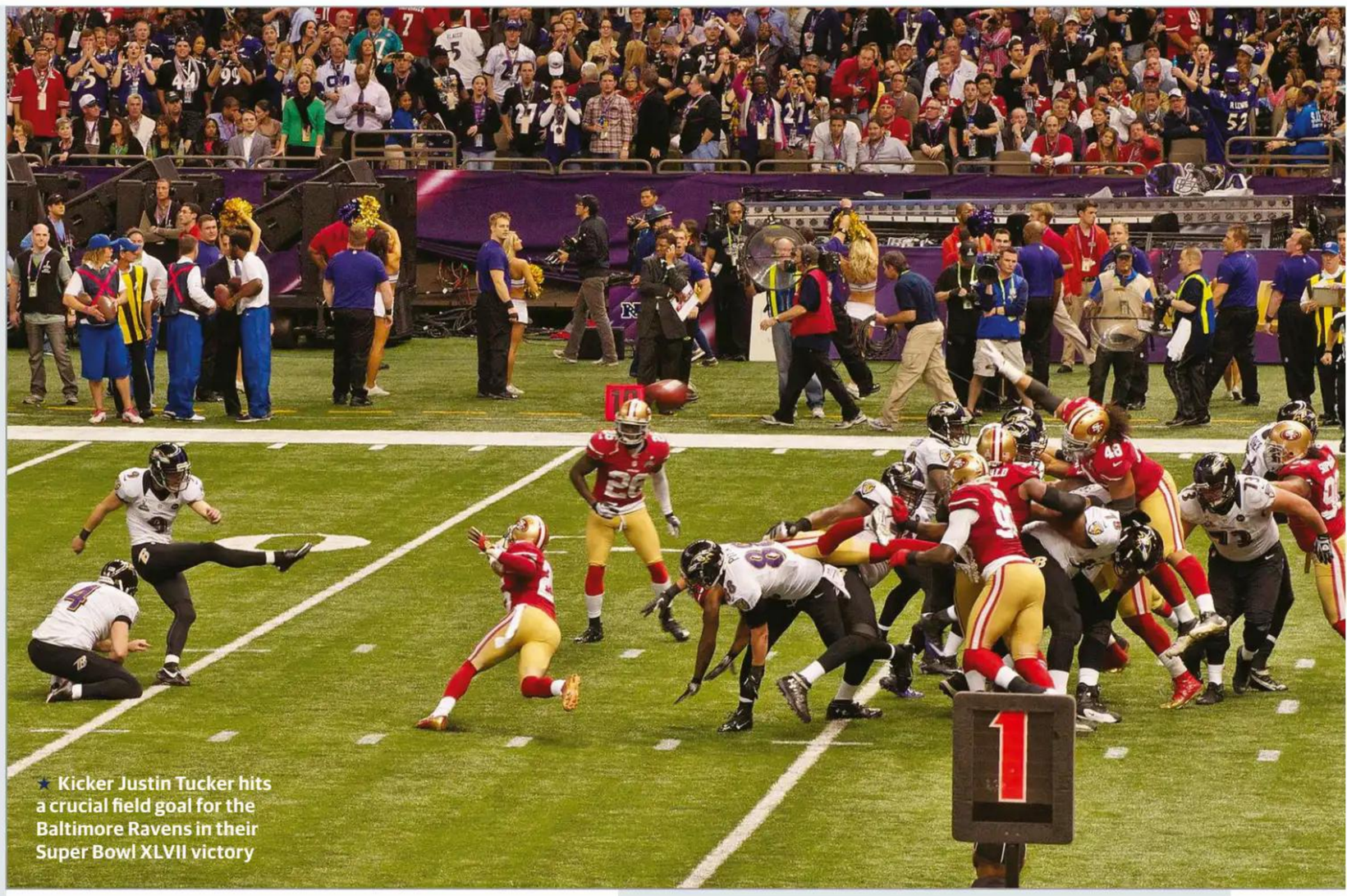
When a foul is committed, a referee will throw a yellow 'flag' which is more like a handkerchief with a beanbag in it. If the foul is later rescinded upon review, the referee will 'pick up the flag'.

FORWARD PROGRESS

Referees will blow a play dead (to be stopped) if a ball-carrier is no longer moving forward. The ball is then spotted as far forward as the runner made it, not where he was driven back to.

FREE AGENT

Contract negotiations in the NFL are some of the most complicated in sport, but an unrestricted free agent may sign for any franchise because his contract has expired. Younger players have more restrictions.



★ Kicker Justin Tucker hits a crucial field goal for the Baltimore Ravens in their Super Bowl XLVII victory

FULLBACK

A position that has begun to disappear, a fullback is like a bigger, broader running back. He will often block for the running back or bulldoze through tacklers when only a few yards are needed.

FUMBLE

In a sport where possession is crucial, giving it up is a cardinal sin. Fumbles generally happen when defenders steal the ball out of the hands of the ball-carrier before he is down.

GUARD

Guards are a type of offensive lineman and line up on either side of the center. They are often some of the best paid because of the importance of protecting the quarterback.

HAIL MARY

A Hail Mary play is a complete last resort. It involves receivers running to the end zone and the quarterback launching the ball up in the air, making it 'up for grabs'. Success is rare but generally game-winning.

HANDOFF

A quarterback, when taking the ball, will either keep and throw it, or hand it off to his running back. Faking a handoff only to throw the ball to distract a defense is called play action.

HOLDING

Generally a penalty given on the line, it is when a blocker or rusher has grabbed or dragged down his opponent as opposed to pushing which is an allowed form of tackling. It is the second most common penalty in the game.

HUDDLE

Before each play, the offense will huddle up to plan a play. The quarterback will communicate, in pre-learned code, the play to each player. Teams may start playing 'no huddle' to rush defenses.

INTERCEPTION

Sometimes called a pick, cornerbacks and safeties spend their life praying for interceptions. Having stolen a pass, a defender can run the ball back for a touchdown – a pick-six.

KICKER

A kicker is naturally all about his leg, as it is his job to kick the ball a fair distance to score. Often an undervalued member of a team, the best kickers can produce winning field goals on a regular basis while their mistakes can go down in history.

LATERAL

A rarity in football due to the likelihood of a fumble, a team can pass the ball backwards on a play as many times as they want while only one forward pass is permitted.

LINE OF SCRIMMAGE

This moves with the spot of the ball and determines where each play starts. The width of the ball on the line across the pitch is called the neutral zone.

LINEBACKER

Defenses generally play three or four linebackers on any one play. They can be sent to blitz, wait to make a tackle or drop into coverage to mark a receiver. They often lead the defense.

LINEMEN

The linemen are usually the biggest and strongest men on most football teams. The general term covers all of the defensive and offensive players who get down on their hands at the line of scrimmage.

VINCE LOMBARDI TROPHY

Named after the coach who won the first two Super Bowls with the Green Bay Packers, this is the reward for the league champion each year. Each player also receives a custom Super Bowl ring.

MOTION

As part of an audible, a quarterback may call a receiver into motion by calling his number and a coded message. He can then move position on the line before the play starts.

ONSIDE KICK

Kicking the ball off generally returns the ball to the opposition, however in desperate situations the kicking team can try the ever-tricky onside kick. The ball must travel ten yards, after which it may be recovered.

OVERTIME

If the scores are tied after four quarters, play in overtime will decide a winner. The first touchdown wins or any score after both teams have had possession of the ball.

PASS INTERFERENCE

Pushing and grabbing a receiver before the ball arrives – pass interference – is illegal and the penalty is awarded 'on the spot of the foul' meaning it can be a huge yardage.

PLAYOFFS

The first goal of every team at the beginning of the season is to make the playoffs. Winning your division or having one of the best two records in your conference outside the divisional champions will get you there.

POCKET

Protection of the quarterback is very important. The area of space around him is known as the pocket. If it starts to collapse, he will either quickly throw or scramble out into more space.

★ Lawrence Tynes of the New York Giants with the famous Vince Lombardi Trophy after winning it for the second time

PUNTER

If the ball is too far away for the team to kick a field goal, most teams will punt the ball away. The ideal punt is long but also high, to allow the kicking team's players to prevent a return.

QUARTERBACK

Quarterbacks are assessed on IQ and physical attributes because of the knowledge required to play this skill position. While most QBs focus on throwing, some also run with the ball to add an extra dimension.

RUNNING BACK

Famously a position where injury is a constant worry, most running backs end up rather battered and bruised in many games they play. Styles can vary from pure speed backs to 'downhill' runners who go through tacklers rather than around them.

RUSH

This is simply a term for running the ball in offense. A back will have a certain number of 'rushing yards' per game or even per year. However, blitzing can also be called rushing.

SACK

When a defender tackles the quarterback before he has had the opportunity to throw a forward pass, he is awarded a sack. However, if he hits him too late he can be penalised for 'roughing the passer'.

★ The Oakland Raiders and Miami Dolphins linemen at the line of scrimmage just before the snap

SAFETY
Safeties provide deep cover if a receiver beats his cornerback. However the word can also refer to an attacker being tackled with the ball in his own end zone, which earns the defense two points.

SCRAMBLE
If the pocket collapses and no-one is open, a quarterback still has an option. He can run – or scramble – to gain yardage. Some more athletic QBs use this as a regular strategy.

SECONDARY
You might sometimes here announcers talk about a back 'breaking into the secondary'. This means he has beaten the first line of defense and is running in more open field where there are fewer defenders.

SHOTGUN
Depending on the type of play, a quarterback may stand five to seven yards behind the line of scrimmage to receive the snap. Otherwise he will generally receive the ball right behind the line, or 'under center'.

SNAP
Apart from kickoff, every play starts with a snap, even punts and kicks at goal. The center will either pass it or throw it between his legs to the quarterback after which the ball is live.

★ Tom Brady of the New England Patriots stands in the pocket and scans the field for an open receiver

★ The Tennessee Titans line up against the Houston Texans for an offensive play with two wide receivers, two tight ends and a running back

SPIKE
If a player is tackled in the field of play, the clock will not stop. To save a timeout, a quarterback may stop the clock by throwing the ball to the ground.

SPOT OF THE BALL
After each play, the referees will decide where the ball stopped and the spot on which to start the next play. This also determines whether a first down or a touchdown has been achieved.

SUPER BOWL
Often the most viewed television event of the year, the Super Bowl is the final of the NFL. It is played between the AFC and NFC champions for the Vince Lombardi Trophy. Currently played on the first Sunday in the month of February.

TACKLE
Tackles are a type of lineman which appear on defense and offense. Defenses will usually send out one (a nose) or two while offenses have two. The word can also refer to stopping a ball-carrier.

TIGHT END
Tight end is a position that used to be about strength and blocking with the occasional catch, but more recently it has become a more diverse role. Tight ends line up next to the tackle and can block or catch.

TIMEOUT
Each team is given three timeouts per half of a short duration with which they can stop the clock whenever they want. These are very valuable if a team is behind late in the game.

TOUCHBACK
If the ball is kicked through the end zone or a defender takes a knee after grabbing the ball, a touchback is called. The next play will start from the 20-yard line.

TOUCHDOWN
A player taking the ball into the opposition end zone scores six points for a touchdown. A player simply has to 'break the plane' of the end zone with the ball while maintaining possession to score.

TURNOVER
Possession can be lost by throwing an interception, fumbling the ball or failing to convert on fourth down. Playing a punt or kick also surrenders possession of the ball. Losing the ball without kicking is called a turnover.

WIDE RECEIVER
These players are responsible for catching passes and scoring touchdowns. They are broken into slot receivers, who are generally smaller and play more centrally, and wideouts, who make more deep runs, but some players can play both.

"Since the very first Super Bowl, the hopes and dreams of fans and players alike have come to a head here"

THE SUPER BOWL

With hundreds of millions of people tuning in to watch every year, the Super Bowl has become one of the greatest spectacles in all of sport

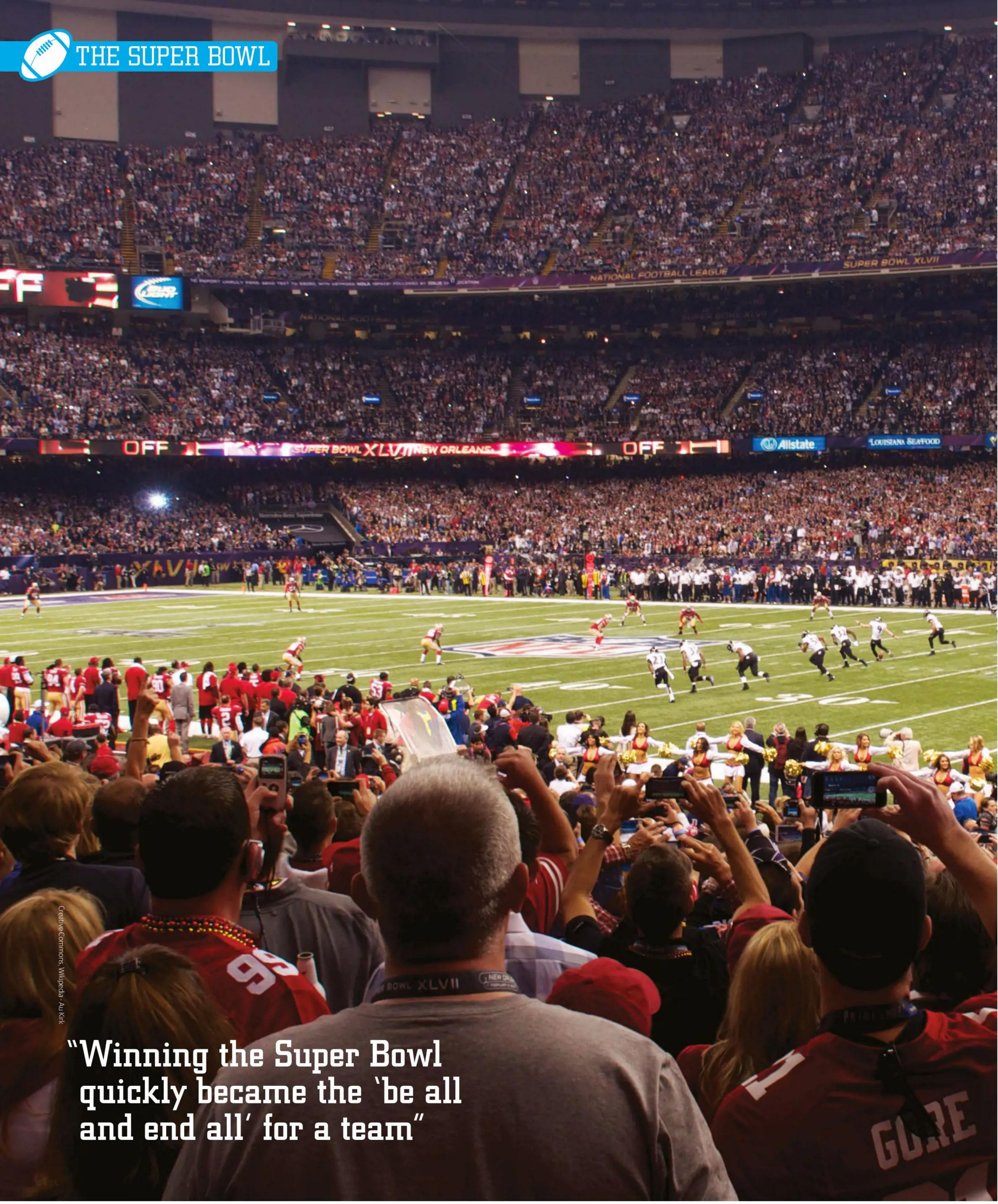
40. THE HISTORY OF THE SUPER BOWL
44. 2024 SEASON REVIEW
50. SUPER BOWL LIX

Super Bowl LIX was watched by 127.7 million viewers. It's a mind-boggling figure, but it also highlights just how much of a phenomenon the NFL's biggest occasion has become. Attracting fans from all corners of the world each and every year, it's now far more than just the culmination of the NFL calendar. It's a must-see event with mass appeal, one able to boast the biggest stars in pop culture, who are privileged to perform during its half-time show.

More important, though, is the stage it sets for ambitious NFL teams. Serving as both a proving ground and a place where legacies are secured, the Super Bowl is overflowing with moments that football fans consider to be among the best ever. Be that an underdog overcoming the odds or a last-minute play that rewrites history, no one ever sits down on Super Bowl Sunday thinking that they won't be entertained.

From the instant the Green Bay Packers defeated the Kansas City Chiefs in the first edition of the game in Los Angeles in 1967, the hopes and dreams of fans and players alike have come to a head here. Be it Joe Montana's last-ditch touchdown pass in Super Bowl XXIII or Joe Namath defying the critics in Super Bowl III, there are few sporting experiences that carry the same weight or emotion.

Better still, it shows no signs of slowing down. At Super Bowl LIX, the Philadelphia Eagles ended the Kansas City Chiefs' recent dominance with a 40-22 victory. Hopefully this season's showpiece will be just as exciting, but who will the contenders be? Only time will tell.



Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Au Kirk

"Winning the Super Bowl quickly became the 'be all and end all' for a team"

★ Thousands of people pack stadiums every year for the Super Bowl, including a 103,219 crowd at Cowboys Stadium in 2011

THE HISTORY OF THE SUPER BOWL

From American pastime to the world's biggest sporting event, the Super Bowl has become a phenomenon

Ever since Super Bowl I on 15 January 1967, the showpiece game of the football season has gone from strength to strength. Proving itself to be one of the most popular sporting events on the planet, the ongoing battle between the champions of the NFC and AFC is one that will undoubtedly rage for years to come. The world just wouldn't have it any other way.

From the NFL's inception in 1920, it faced constant threats from other leagues wanting to rise up and take its place. With the sport still in its relative infancy, other organisations had ambitions to become the dominant power as its popularity started to increase, but no one was successful in overtaking the momentum and foresight the NFL had shown. That is until the American Football League (AFL) was formed.

Established in 1960, the AFL was predominately made up of disgruntled owners who had been refused NFL franchises. The organisation was, at first, anything but a success. When it secured a television contract with ABC (subsequently followed by one with NBC), however, business started to pick up. For a start, AFL games were more offensive-minded than NFL matches, making them far more appealing to a TV-viewing audience. As its buzz started to grow and its ability to attract the best college athletes and major NFL stars increased, the league became a key player. More importantly, by 1965 it had become a thorn in the NFL's side.

Realising that neither could afford a long-term battle, the two powerhouses agreed upon a merger before the 1966 season that would go into effect in 1970. Up until that point – and long after it – both signed off on a 'world championship game' where the winners from each league would meet to fight for dominance for that year. Jokingly named the 'Super Bowl' by then-Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt in a letter to NFL commissioner Pete Rozell, the name stuck, even though it took until Super Bowl III for everyone involved to accept that the 'AFL-NFL Championship Game' title just wasn't going to work.

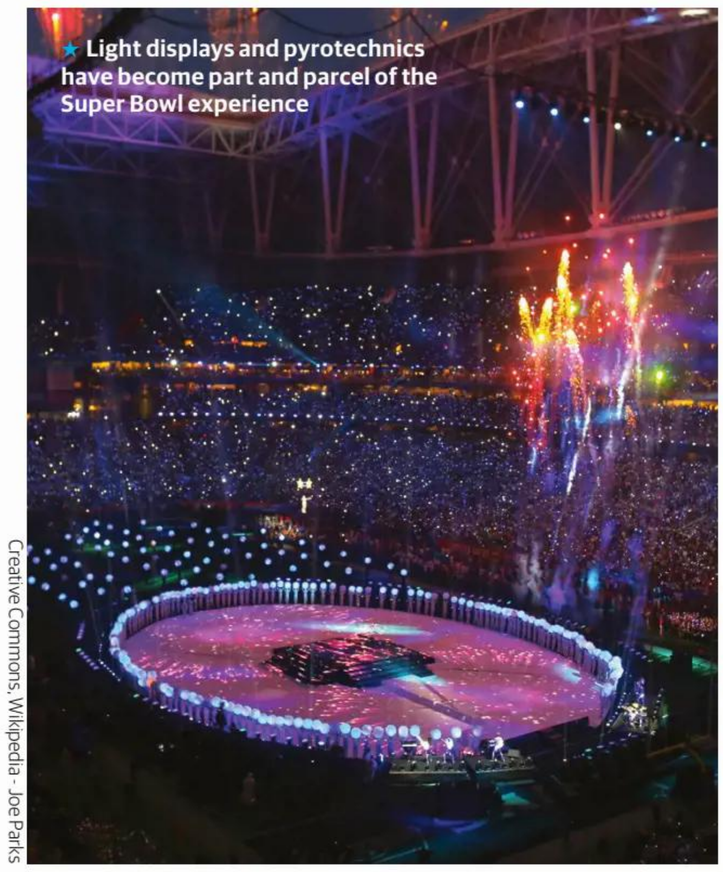
The National Football Conference currently leads the American Football Conference 30-29 in total Super Bowl wins, and rivalries between the conferences throughout the years have been fierce. The first team to stamp their influence on the occasion were the Green Bay Packers, who won the first two Super Bowls back to back. Guided forward by double MVP-winning quarterback Bart Starr, this didn't come as a huge surprise given how successful Green Bay had been in the years leading up to the event's debut; they had won the NFL Championship in 1961, 1962 and

HALF-TIME HEROES

★ **The Super Bowl's half-time show is now as synonymous with the event as the game itself.** With TV ratings and mass appeal at an all-time high, the NFL has taken into account how important it is to secure mainstream attractions to ensure a broad audience and national interest (which allows them to keep ad revenue high). It wasn't until 1991 that pop artists took over, however, when New Kids On The Block took centre stage. Prior to this, half-time shows were themed, often featuring a marching band of some kind. When pop royalty Michael Jackson performed in 1993, it was clear that the Super Bowl had rejected traditional entertainment for good.

★ Puerto Rican superstar Bad Bunny took over Super Bowl LX in one of the most acclaimed half-time shows ever

THE SUPER BOWL



★ Light displays and pyrotechnics have become part and parcel of the Super Bowl experience

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Joe Parks

1965. If anyone was going to come out of the gates flying, it was always going to be the Packers.

This all changed at Super Bowl III, though, thanks to the AFL's New York Jets and, more specifically, quarterback Joe Namath. Going into the game the Jets couldn't have been considered more of an underdog. Pitted against the Baltimore Colts – who were the 18-point favourite before kick-off – Namath famously lambasted the press and anyone who had already counted his team out. Dismissed as arrogance at the time, he backed up every word when the Jets claimed a famous 16-7 victory. It's still remembered to this day as a classic.

The AFL's insistence that it be seen as an equal to the NFL continued the following year at Super Bowl IV, as the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the Minnesota Vikings 23-7. These were the first signs that the division was more than a match for its rival, and the Super Bowl quickly became a must-see event in the sporting calendar.

Super Bowl V put a totally new twist on proceedings, however. With the merger between the two leagues now complete, a greater sense of urgency began to make itself known. Winning the Super Bowl quickly became the 'be all and end all' for any team. While new AFC member the Baltimore Colts would finally secure victory with a win over the Dallas Cowboys (in the only Super Bowl in which the MVP award has gone to a member of the losing team), three names began to rise to prominence throughout the 1970s.

The first of these was the aforementioned Cowboys, who picked themselves up after their loss the previous year and beat the Miami Dolphins 24-3 at Super Bowl VI. A pattern of a defeated team being rejuvenated the following season began to emerge. Not only did former losers the Dolphins lift the Vince Lombardi trophy at Super Bowl VII, but they went 14-0 during the regular season en route to the title. The only time a team has had a perfect run, Miami continued to shock the world in 1974 when they once again stood tall at the end of the season. Crushing the Minnesota Vikings 24-7 at Super Bowl VIII, they were the franchise to watch – or so everyone thought.

With a total of six Super Bowl crowns to their name, the Pittsburgh Steelers are the most decorated team in history (alongside the New England Patriots), and it all started in 1975. Coached by Chuck Noll, Pittsburgh not only took the gold home in Super Bowl IX but also did so at X, XIII and XIV, pulling off four victories in just six years. Between these victories, the only teams who were able to snatch away the trophy were the Oakland Raiders and the Dallas Cowboys.

A new decade brought about change once more, however, mostly thanks to a resurgence from the NFC, whose teams went undefeated from Super Bowl XIX in 1985 to XXXI in 1997. The San Francisco 49ers, Chicago Bears, Washington Redskins, New York Giants and the Oakland Raiders managed to be the standout teams throughout the 1980s, with the Dallas Cowboys truly realising their potential in the 1990s, cementing themselves as a side who would become forever associated with the sport. Going all the way in 1993, 1994 and 1996, they also controlled the NFC Conference, getting to the postseason every year except for 1990 and 1997.

The end of the decade and beginning of the new millennium would see the pendulum swing back in the AFC's favour, however. Upsetting Green Bay at Super Bowl XXXII, the Denver Broncos and Hall Of Famer quarterback John Elway reversed the division's fortunes, breaking a 13-year NFC winning streak that few thought would end. But

★ The pageantry and grandiose nature of the Super Bowl gets bigger and bigger every year, right down to the over-the-top entrances

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Au Kirk

"The Super Bowl is the foremost showcase of achievement, talent and spectacle"

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Jeffrey Beall

THE BEST OF THE BEST

★ **You're never going to find two people in agreement over which Super Bowl is the greatest of all time – there are just too many variables.** What's hard to argue against, however, is that the New England Patriots have been involved in two of the most dramatic games in history. Both were incredible underdog victories, but the circumstances in each couldn't have been more different.

In 2008 the Patriots were, quite literally, unstoppable. Winning every game of the regular and postseason, their record stood at 18-0 going into the showcase game. The New York Giants had other ideas, though, and quarterback Eli Manning ultimately led the outsiders to a thrilling comeback win.

In Super Bowl LI, however, the Pats' coach and quarterback duo of Bill Belichick and Tom Brady pulled off an even greater upset. Trailing 28-3 to the Atlanta Falcons in the third quarter, they rallied to complete an overtime comeback for the ages.

it was Super Bowl XXXVI when a genuine new contender emerged.

A success story that's still sung about today, the arrival of quarterback Tom Brady and the New England Patriots is legendary. Surprising the world in 2002 by upsetting the St Louis Rams, the Patriots would go on to win the championship in 2004 and 2005, repeating the success a decade later at Super Bowl XLIX and again in 2017 before falling to first-time winners the Philadelphia Eagles in 2018. They weren't done, though, coming back in 2019 and winning a sixth Super Bowl against the now-relocated LA Rams.

The outstanding candidates to succeed the Patriots dynasty are undoubtedly the Patrick Mahomes-led Kansas City Chiefs, who were victorious in the 2019, 2022 and 2023 seasons, though they were defeated in the 2020 and 2024 season finales by Tampa Bay and the Philadelphia Eagles respectively. And at Super Bowl LX the Patriots themselves returned to the showpiece game for the first time in the post-Brady era, however they were soundly defeated by the Sam Darnold-led Seattle Seahawks.

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Au Kirk

★ As tensions have risen over the years, Super Bowl games never fail to deliver on excitement

★ Jake Elliott puts boot to ball on 4 September, and NFL 2025 is officially underway

2025 SEASON REVIEW

Levi's Stadium was the ultimate destination for every team as NFL 2025 kicked off

© Todd Rosenberg/Getty Images

The regular season had its usual share of remarkable games, fantastic finishes and other-worldly performances. Each of the 32 teams embarked on a new campaign with at least hope, if not expectation, and it shaped up into one of the most competitive seasons in recent memory.

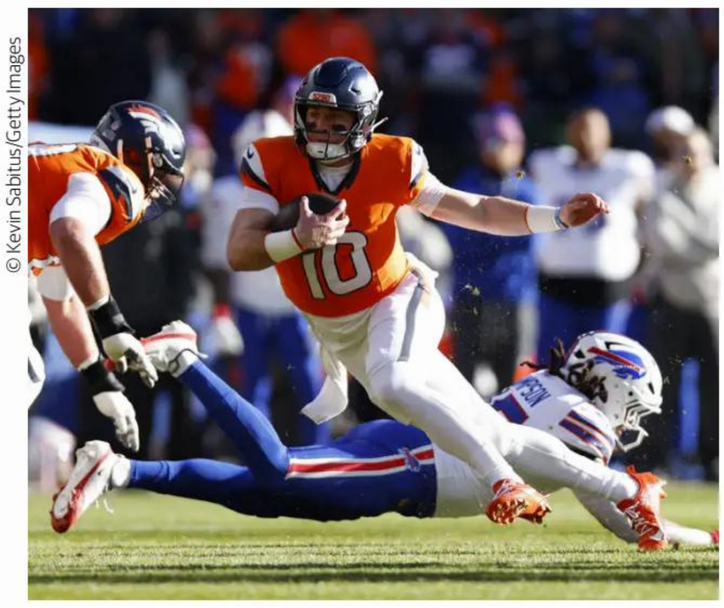
Buffalo and Philadelphia looked like good bets to represent their respective conferences in the early going, both opening up with four straight wins, but then falling back into the pack with two losses. After nine weeks, the AFC West, NFC North and NFC West each had three teams with winning records, and it was the NFC West that was emerging as the powerhouse of the league – by week 15 the Seahawks, Rams and 49ers all had double-digit wins.

While these three teams battled for supremacy, attention was being drawn to New England. After three years in the doldrums, the Patriots were back, with their second-year quarterback, Drake Maye, looking like a potential MVP. At the same time as one former powerhouse was roaring back, another was fading, the Chiefs dropping out of contention with a shocking six-game losing streak that ended their playoff chances. They had reached the AFC Championship Game for seven consecutive seasons, but staying at the top is just as hard as getting there in the first place. The team that had ended the Chiefs' attempt at a threepeat last season, Philadelphia, couldn't regain their former glory either. A strangely sputtering season, with alternating streaks of wins and losses, saw them limp to an 11-6 record.

The NFL regular season always seems incredibly brief. Exactly four months after the first ball was kicked off, the last regular season game finished... and it was a barnstormer. With the Ravens and Steelers both needing to win to clinch the AFC North and make the playoffs, the stakes could hardly

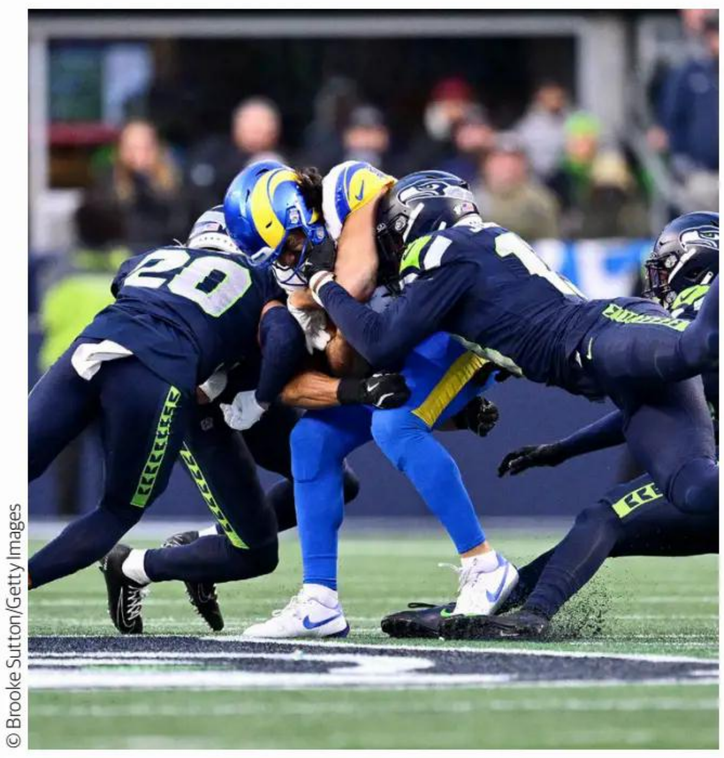
© Elsa/Getty Images

★ **The last game of the regular season saw the Ravens and Steelers battle for the AFC North crown**



© Kevin Sabitus/Getty Images

★ **Bo Nix led the Broncos past the Bills in the playoffs... but was then lost to a fractured ankle**



© Brooke Sutton/Getty Images

★ **Puka Nacua is hit by three Seahawks during the NFC Championship Game**

have been higher. The Ravens took a 10-point lead, but then got drawn into a slugfest where the lead changed hands five more times. The Steelers finally found a way to win, securing the last playoff spot up for grabs.

As the dust began to settle on the regular season, it was clear that an interesting trend had continued to develop. There were only six 4,000-yard passing performances in 2025, the same as 2024. That is the lowest since only five quarterbacks managed it in 2010, and there hasn't been a 5,000-yard performance since 2022.

It is part of a subtle rebalancing of the game – there were 17 thousand-yard rushers last season, the most since 2010. The NFL tends to notice this kind of thing, and if the trend continues it would not be a surprise to see some tweaks to the rules to get passing numbers up again

Eight different quarterbacks have won the passing title in the last eight seasons, and last year it was Matthew Stafford who threw the ball further than anyone else. It was his first time winning the award, and other first-timers nabbed the other major awards as well, James Cook leading the league in rushing and Jaxon Smith-Njigba snagging the receiving title, while Myles Garret led the league in sacks.

But in many ways the season was only half over. The first part had merely sifted out the also-rans. For the 18 teams who did not make the playoffs, thoughts started to turn towards free agency and the draft (some had been looking

★ **Titanic struggles between the Rams, 49ers and Seahawks marked the NFC West out as the league's toughest division**

ahead for many weeks by this point) but the 14 teams who had fought and scratched their way into the postseason had bigger dreams. Whatever had happened in the regular season was now unimportant for the cream of the NFL. All that mattered was winning the next game.

Having knocked heads all year with their formidable division rivals, the Seahawks came up against them again in the playoffs. They had split their games with both the Rams and 49ers during the regular season, and the teams surely knew everything there was to know about each other. First the Niners and then the Rams fell as Seattle returned to the Super Bowl for the first time since 2014.

The Patriots had a harder slog through the postseason. Forced into a Wild Card game, they handled the Chargers and then the Texans, and then got a stroke of fortune. The charging Broncos suddenly found themselves without their own young star at quarterback, Bo Nix having suffered

a fractured ankle in a wild overtime victory against the Bills in the divisional round. Without Nix, the Broncos could only score a single touchdown, but that was almost enough as their defense put the shackles on Maye and held New England to just 10 points. We would have a repeat of Super Bowl XLIX, and if the Seahawks looked like solid favourites, the Patriots could hardly care less. They were back in the big game after a three-year playoff drought.

Two days before the Super Bowl, the NFL handed out the awards at the 15th Annual NFL Honors: Matthew Stafford (NFL MVP), Jaxon Smith-Njigba (Offensive Player of the Year), Myles Garrett (Defensive Player of the Year), Tetairoa McMillan (Offensive Rookie of the Year) and Carson Schwesinger (Defensive Rookie of the Year) were the major winners on a night where everyone except two teams could look back on the season. The Patriots and Seahawks, meanwhile, were still looking ahead...

★ With Patrick Mahomes banged up for much of the year, the Chiefs were unable to make the postseason

©Michael Owens/Getty Images

TOP 10 MOMENTS

LAST SEASON, WE WERE TREATED ONCE MORE TO THE UNLIKELY, THE UNFORGETTABLE AND THE DOWNRIGHT UNHINGED. HERE ARE 10 OF THE MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS FROM NFL 2025...

DOWN TO THE WIRE

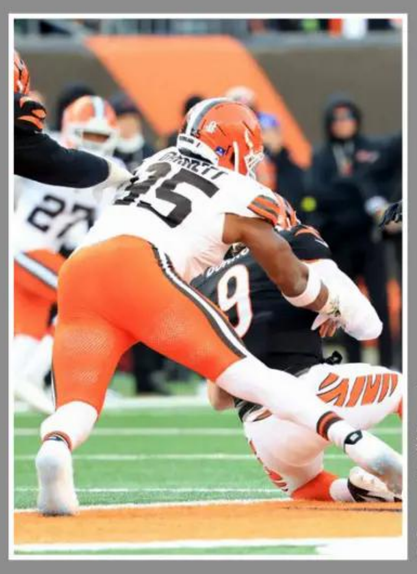
If you like to be kept on the edge of your seat, there has never been a playoff weekend like that of 10-11 January. The first four games of the 2025 postseason saw a combined 12 lead changes in the fourth quarter. How wild is that? It broke the record for the total number of fourth-quarter lead changes over an entire postseason. The winning touchdown in all four games came in the last three minutes of the fourth quarter.

© Scott Taetsch/Getty Images

★ The Rams' Colby Parkinson snags the winning touchdown with 38 seconds left against the Panthers

FOR THE RECORD

It was way back in 2002 that Michael Strahan set a new record for sacks in an NFL season, after notching a suspiciously easy takedown of Aaron Rodgers. His total of 22.5 was matched by TJ Watt 20 years later, and Myles Garret had 22 going into the Browns' season finale against Cincinnati. With just over five minutes left in the game, he dropped Joe Burrow to set a new record.



© Cooper Neill/Getty Images

THE COMEBACK KINGS

© Brooke Sutton/Getty Images

The Broncos trailed 19-0 going into the final quarter of their week seven clash with the Giants, and they allowed two more touchdowns in the final quarter... but they won the game thanks to a 33-point explosion of their own. Two rushing scores from Bo Nix and another two touchdown passes set the stage for Wil Lutz to land the walk-off 39-yard field goal for the win.

OLD MAN RIVERS

© Bryan Bennett/Getty Images

Many NFL teams struggle to find a capable quarterback... it turns out there was one coaching high school football for the previous four seasons. At the age of 44, Philip Rivers dusted off his cleats and answered an emergency call from the Colts. After suiting up for the first time in five years for a week 15 contest against the Seahawks, Rivers passed for four touchdowns in his three-game stint, before retiring again.

BIG MAN ON CAMPUS

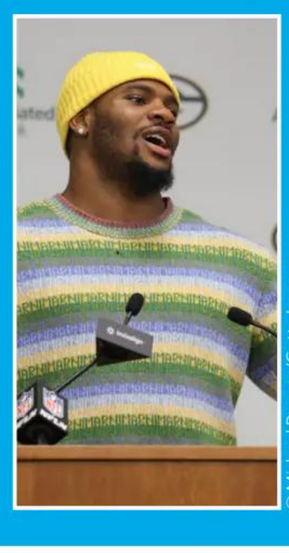
© Kevin Sabitus/Getty Images

★ Davis turns on the jets during his touchdown return

In a week three contest, Philadelphia's Jordan Davis sealed a win with a stunning 61-yard return of a blocked field goal. A successful kick would have won the game for the Rams, but Jordan's play was remarkable for another reason as well – he reached 18.59mph on his return, the fastest speed registered by any player weighing more than 300 pounds in the last 10 years.

TRADING PLACES

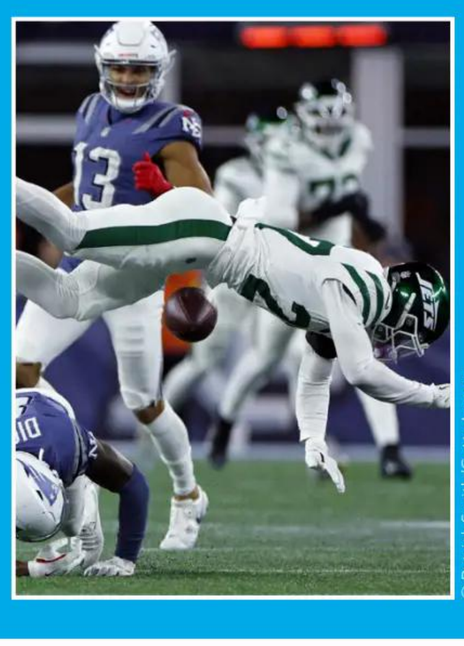
Teams just don't let players like Micah Parsons get away... but the Cowboys like to do things their own way. The pass-rushing ace was traded to Green Bay in return for two first-round draft picks and Pro Bowl defensive tackle Kenny Clark. Parsons received a $188 million extension and the move seemed to stun the Cowboys, who stumbled to a 3-5-1 start.



© Michael Reaves/Getty Images

NOT TOO PICKY

This moment took 18 weeks to play out. You would expect a former cornerback to know how to get an interception out of his defense, especially when that former player had made 41 interceptions himself over a great NFL career. Despite this, the Jets, under Aaron Glenn, became the first team in NFL history to play an entire season without picking off a single pass.



© Patrick Smith/Getty Images

★ Sanders in action after winning the starting job in Cleveland

© Michael Owens/Getty Images

HELTER SKELTER

Some draft pundits had touted Shedeur Sanders as a potential overall No.1 draft pick... instead, he suffered through an agonising slide as pick after pick (and round after round) of the NFL draft went by. The Browns put him out of his misery with the 144th pick, giving Sanders all the incentive he could ever need to prove his doubters wrong.

★ John Harbaugh (left) and Mike Tomlin shake hands before their week 18 game

© Don Juan Moore/Getty Images

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?

John Harbaugh and Mike Tomlin combined for 37 seasons, 394 wins and two Super Bowl titles with the Ravens and Steelers, respectively. In those 37 seasons they posted just one losing record (Baltimore's 5-11 mark in 2015), but both men were let go at the end of the season in one of the most shocking double-barrelled cullings in recent memory.

THE LITTLE TRAIN THAT COULD

© Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

In week nine, Jaguars kicker Cam Little landed a 68-yard field goal against the Raiders. It was a monstrous kick, but some said he couldn't get close to that distance outdoors. In week 18 he nailed a 67-yarder against the Titans, meaning he holds the NFL records for both indoor and outdoor field goals. Both kicks helped the Jags to victories in their division-winning season.

★ Green, blue and white confetti swirls as the Seahawks get their hands on the Vince Lombardi Trophy for the second time

SUPER BOWL LX

SEAHAWKS 29 - 13 PATRIOTS

For the second straight year, the Super Bowl was a one-sided affair. Unlike last year, however, when the Eagles dismantled the Chiefs, this was a slow-burner. There was always the possibility that the Patriots (who scored the second-highest number of points in the regular season) might explode into life, and with the Seahawks also struggling to put points on the board, the game felt closer than it actually was.

In the lead-up to the game, much was made of the fact that this was the first time a USC quarterback would start a Super Bowl. Sam Darnold was on his fifth NFL team, and although he had turned in consecutive 4,000-yard seasons, there were still those who questioned his big-game mentality. He had thrown 14 interceptions in the regular season and had fumbled the ball a league-leading 11 times. The feeling was that if you could rattle him early, he might just fall apart.

The Patriots tried to do just that, playing aggressive defense in the early going, clearly looking to force a turnover. In the announcers' booth, Cris Collinsworth declared that the Patriots were intent on bottling up the Seahawks running game, but their plan did not work. After a quiet first quarter, Kenneth Walker III broke loose in the second, ripping off gains of 30 and 29 yards to set up Seattle's second field goal.

The New England defense were playing well, but they couldn't quite get the turnover they craved – Darnold's passes were near perfect when coverage was tight, although he missed a couple of open receivers for would-be touchdowns as the game settled into a defensive arm-wrestling match.

While Darnold was doing just enough, Drake Maye was having a nightmare for the Patriots. He came into the game having taken a league-leading 15 sacks in the postseason, and that tally just kept rising. He was sacked three times on New England's first four drives and just over midway through the third period he had equalled Joe

© PATRICK T. FALLON / Getty Ima

Burrow's record for sacks taken in a postseason, with 19. The Seahawks would get to him twice more as the Patriots offense waded through mud. Aside from taking a knee at the end of the first half, New England punted eight times on its first eight drives.

By then, the Seahawks lead was up to 12 points, but there was still the sense that momentum might shift on the first turnover. When it came, however, it was the Seahawks' suffocating defense that delivered. Maye fumbled after a sack and it was recovered by Byron Murphy, setting up Darnold's 16-yard touchdown to AJ Barner.

Seattle fans were still not counting their chickens, and on the next drive Maye showed how good he could be, finding Mack Hollins on consecutive plays, the first for 24 yards and the second for a 35-yard touchdown. At 19-7 the game was back in the balance, and after forcing a punt, New England got the ball again with nearly 11 minutes left in the fourth quarter. Maye started to move the ball and momentum had clearly shifted... but then he threw an ill-advised pass, a desperation throw when the time for desperation had not yet arrived. Julian Love intercepted the pass and returned it 35 yards. The Seahawks steadied their nerves with a drive that led to another field goal and burned three precious minutes off the clock.

Clearly rattled, Maye threw another interception on his next possession, Uchenna Nwosu returning the ball 45 yards for an insurance score. The game was over. The Seahawks had found a way to excel in Super Bowl LX.

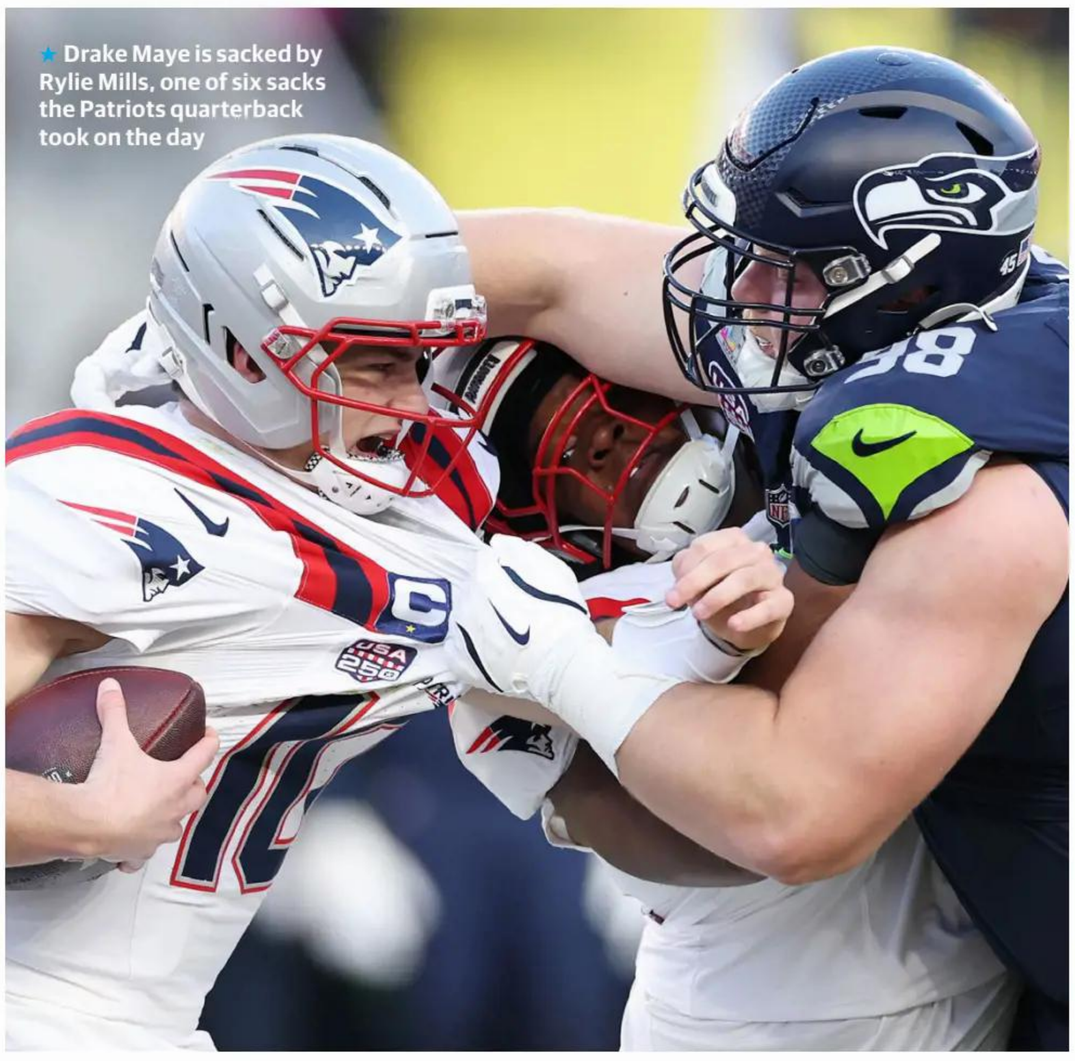
FIFTH TIME LUCKY

★ Sam Darnold had started games for four other NFL teams before this season started. The Jets, Panthers, Niners and Vikings had all decided to move on from the former No.3 overall pick, but Super Bowl LX was a lesson in perseverance.

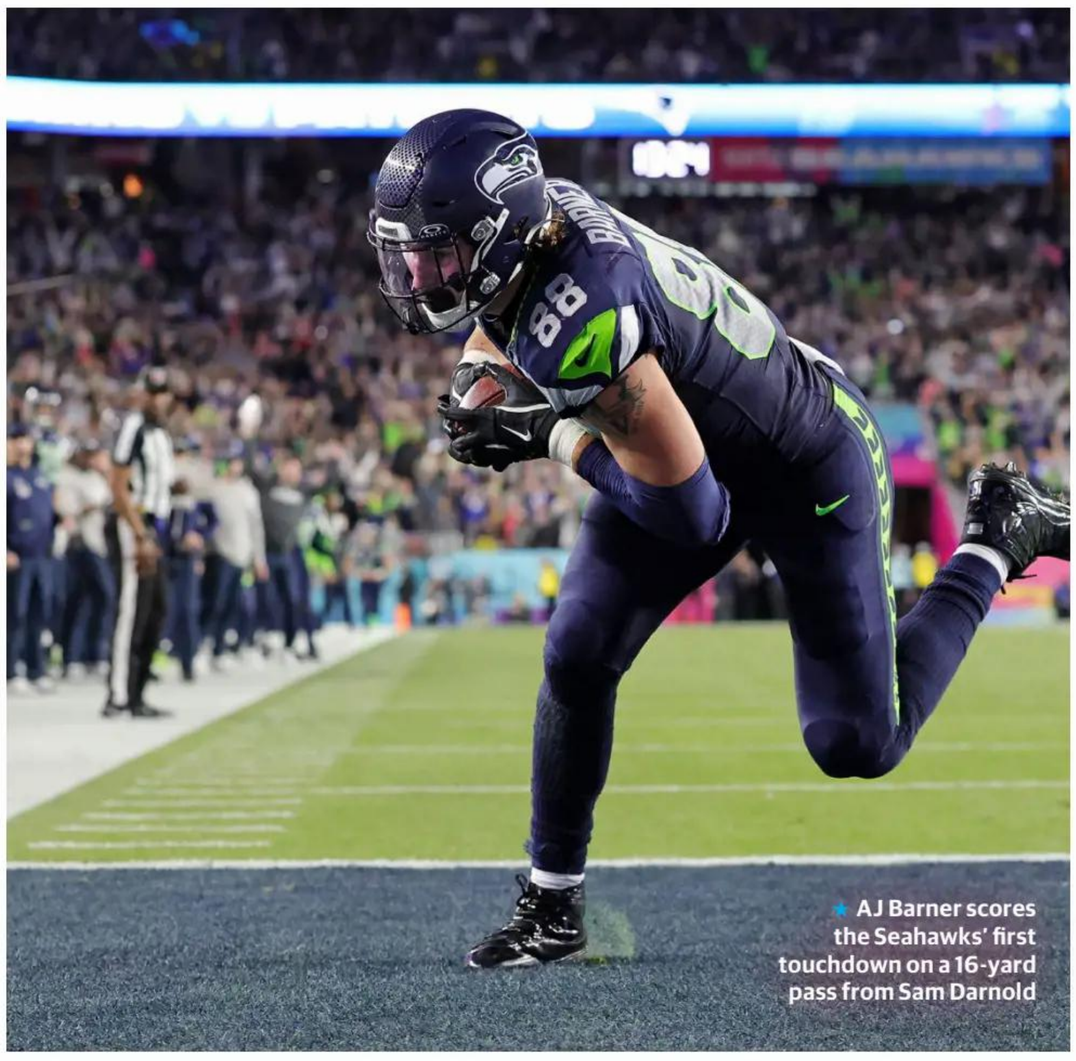
Darnold was not brilliant in the biggest game of his life, but he remained calm in the face of a fierce Patriots defense, often utilising his underrated mobility to move out of harm's way.

A total of 202 yards and just one touchdown looks pedestrian by modern standards, but the Seahawks knew that turnovers were on New England's list of must-haves if they were to win. Darnold shut the door in their faces, barely giving them a sniff of an interception after leading the league in turnovers during the regular season.

★ Darnold unleashes a pass on his way to the ultimate vindication


★ Drake Maye is sacked by Rylie Mills, one of six sacks the Patriots quarterback took on the day

© Kevin C. Cox / Staff/Getty Images



★ AJ Barner scores the Seahawks' first touchdown on a 16-yard pass from Sam Darnold

© Getty Images

50 ICONIC NFL PLAYERS

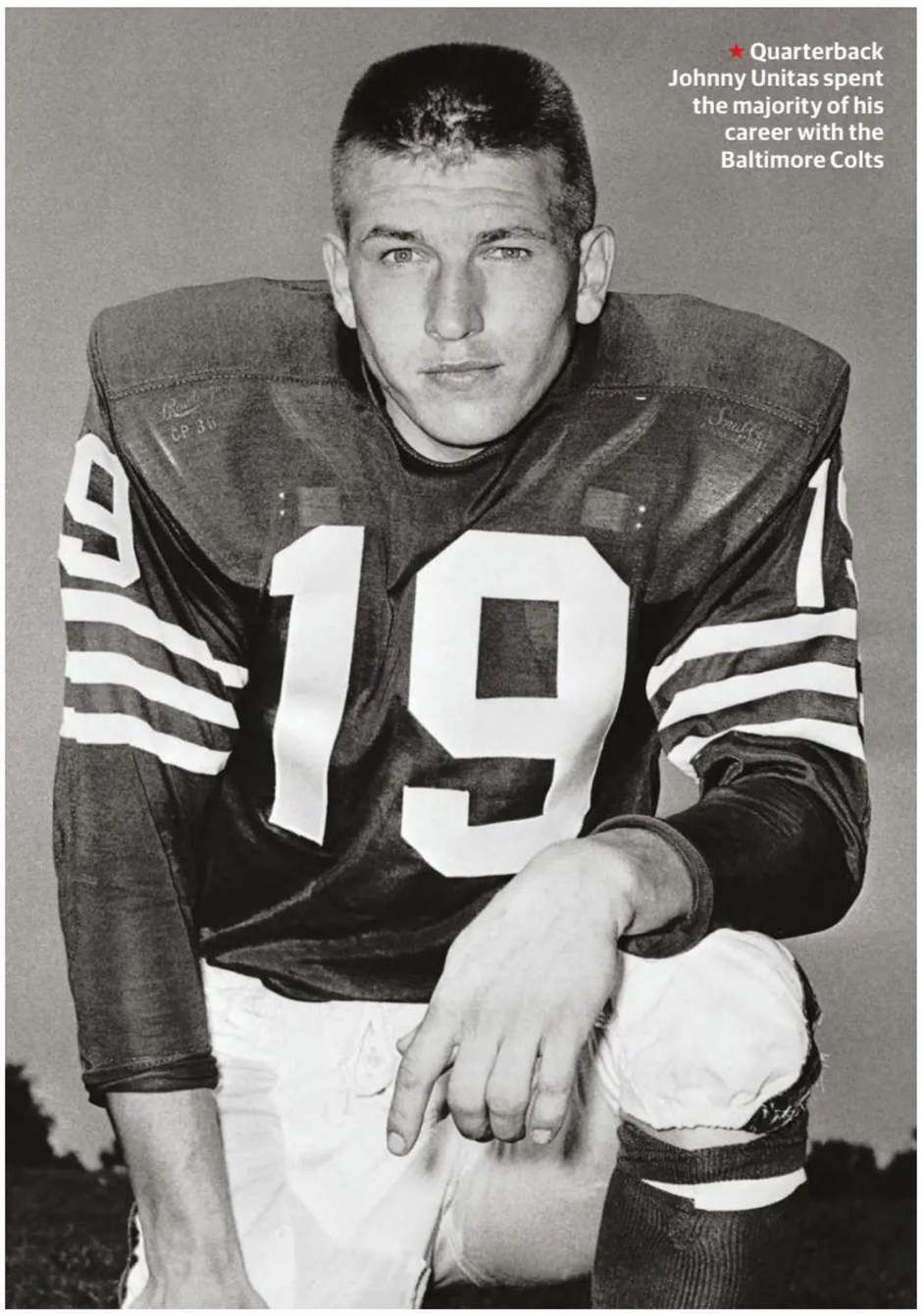
Discover some of the most influential players to ever grace the National Football League and exactly what it was that made them so special

To succeed in a gruelling sport like football requires a fistful of traits that can't be coached. Athletic ability and/or a frame that can stop a locomotive in its tracks are a given, but beyond that the sport requires guile, mental strength and the ability to get inside the head of your opponents and mess with their minds. Needless to say, the sport has thrown up many great players over the years that have these skills in abundance, and here we showcase some of the greatest individuals to ever grace the gridiron field.

From laser-guided ball throwers to rapier-like runners, immovable linebackers to unflappable receivers, there is no shortage of legends to take up any position on the pitch. And while there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of players worthy of a place in this list, we have tried to present a wide range of candidates, some of whom were incredible at what they did, and others who had the oversized personalities to match their status on the pitch. So, from the players employed to win games to those there to prevent the opposition from doing so, whatever the cost, here is our list of 50 of the NFL's most iconic players.

JOHNNY UNITAS

01 Spending the majority of his career with the Baltimore Colts, quarterback Johnny Unitas was voted the NFL's most valuable player in 1957, 1959, 1964 and 1967. For decades he held the record for the most consecutive games with a touchdown pass, which he set between 1956 and 1960, before he was finally surpassed by Drew Brees in 2012.



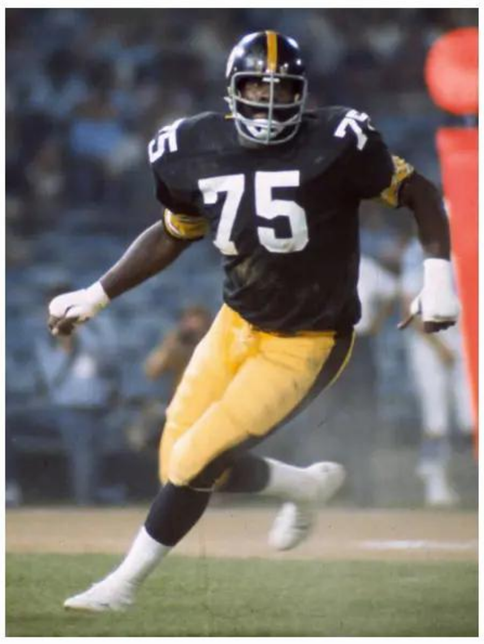
★ Quarterback Johnny Unitas spent the majority of his career with the Baltimore Colts

DARRELL GREEN

02 Considered to be one of the best cornerbacks to play in the NFL, Darrell Green spent his entire playing career (from 1983 to 2002) with the Washington Redskins and was famed for his considerable speed. Nicknamed the 'Ageless Wonder' by his peers for his energetic performances on the pitch well into the twilight of his career, Green was a two-time Super Bowl Champion (XXII and XXVI).

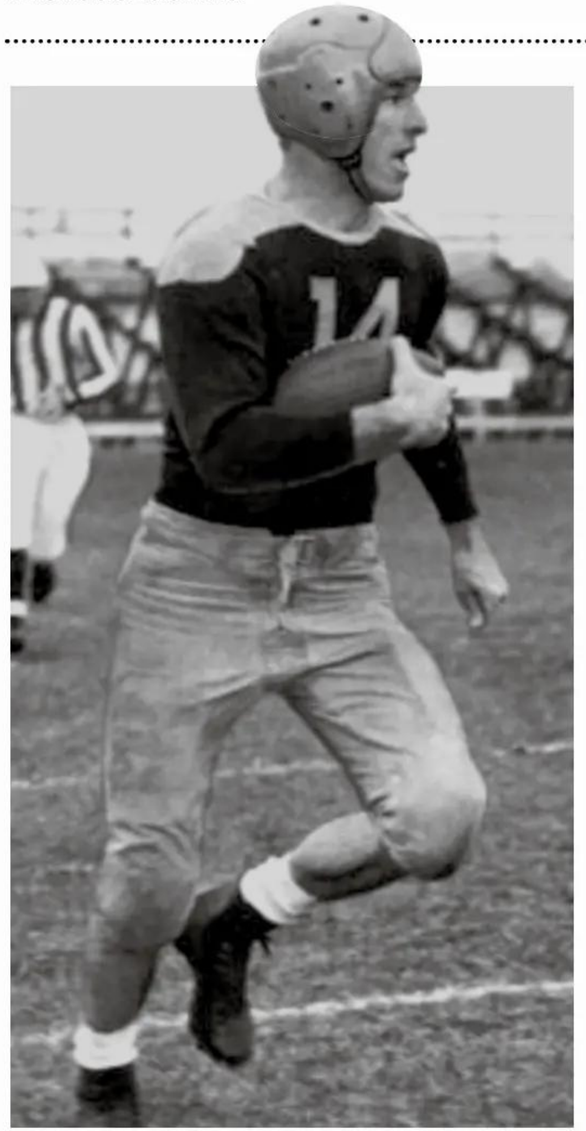
RONNIE LOTT

03 During his 14 seasons in the NFL (from 1981 to 1995), Ronnie Lott played cornerback, free safety and strong safety for the San Francisco 49ers, Los Angeles Raiders, New York Jets and the Kansas City Chiefs and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2000. Widely considered to be one of the best safeties of all time, Lott recorded 85 sacks and 63 interceptions during his NFL career, which he returned for 730 yards and five touchdowns.



JOE GREENE

04 Greene played defensive tackle for the Pittsburgh Steelers throughout the early 1970s and was known as 'Mean Joe' Greene because of his no-nonsense approach to defending. Never afraid to steamroll his opponents, Greene was the winner of two NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards and the recipient of five first team All-Pro selections. He also won the Super Bowl four times in one of the most distinguished NFL careers of all time.



DON HUTSON

05 Spending 11 seasons with the Green Bay Packers from 1935 to 1945, Don Hutson was considered the game's first modern receiver and is credited with creating many of the pass routes that are still used in the NFL today. Back in his day, Hutson held all of the major records associated with wide receivers, including career receptions, yards and touchdowns, and although he played before the advent of the Super Bowl, he triumphed three times in the NFL Championship game that preceded it.

EMMITT SMITH

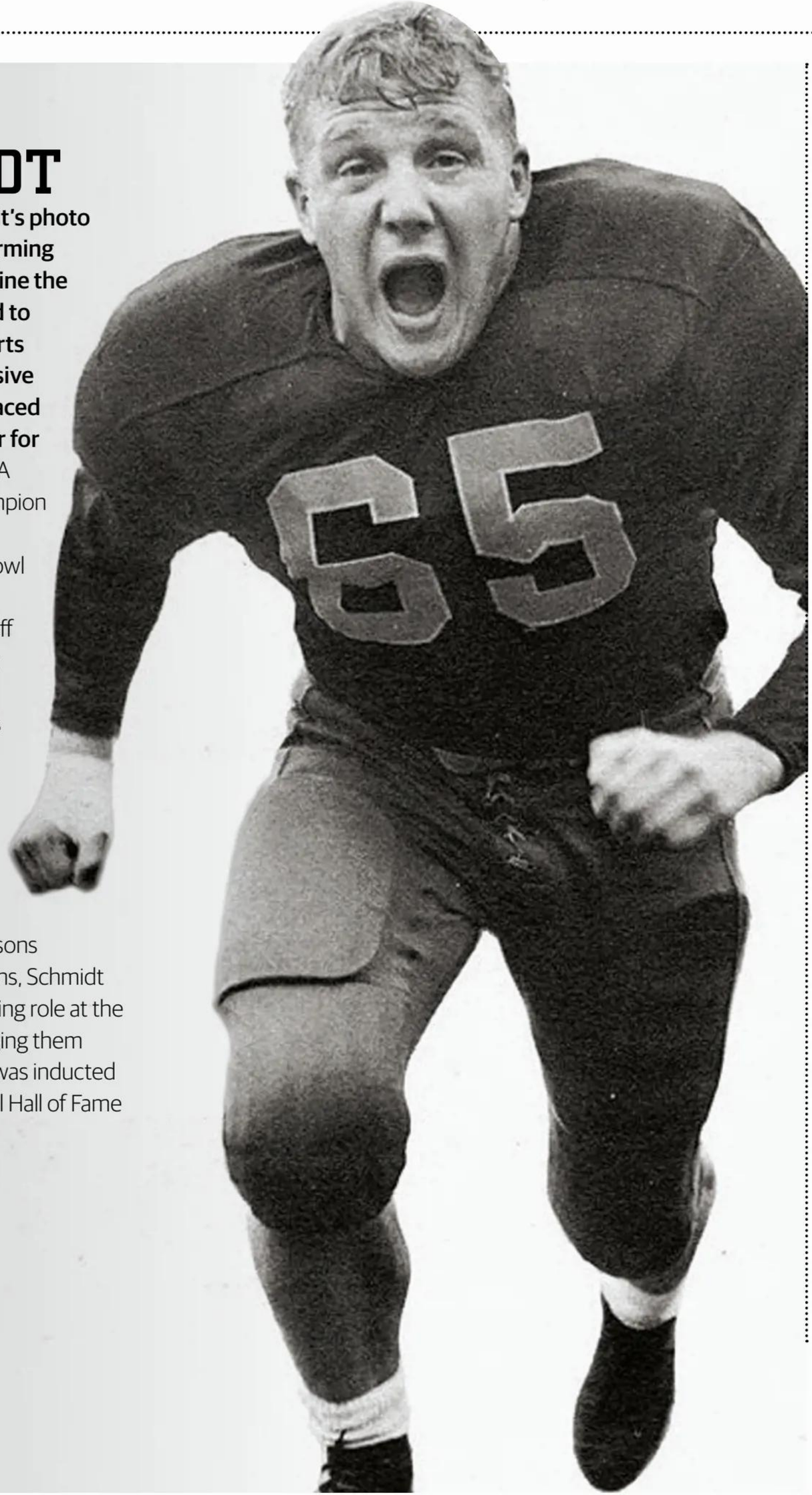
06 Spending the majority of his 15 seasons in the NFL with the Dallas Cowboys, running back Emmitt Smith became the league's all-time rushing leader with a total of 18,355 yards from 4,409 carries, breaking the previous record set by Walter Payton. Part of three Super Bowl-winning Cowboys teams, Smith also holds the unprecedented honour of being the only running back to win a Super Bowl championship, the NFL MVP, the NFL rushing crown and the Super Bowl MVP award in the same season (1993). In total he led the league in rushing and won the Super Bowl in the same year on three occassions (also in 1992 and 1995) and is one of only two non-kickers to score more than 1,000 NFL career points.

TERRY BRADSHAW

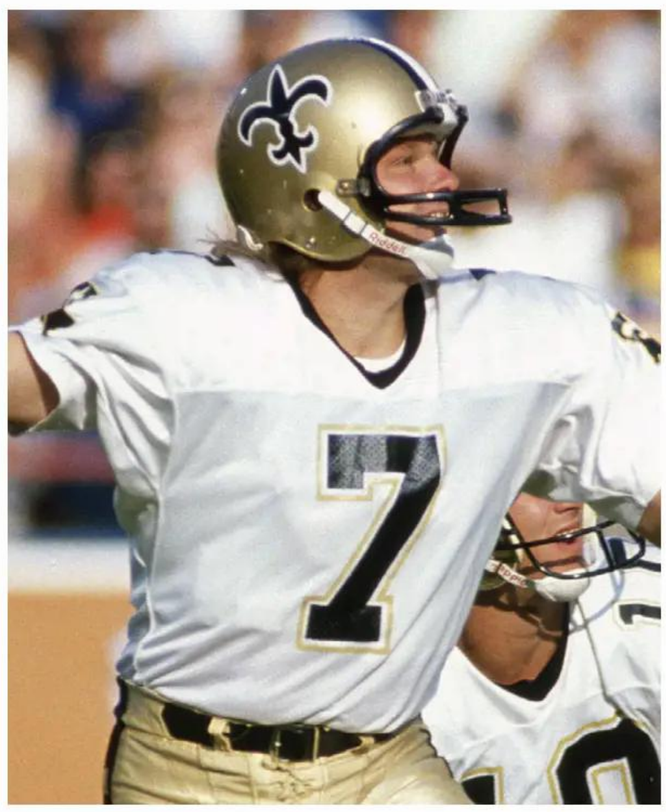
07 A veteran of 14 seasons for the Pittsburgh Steelers, Terry Bradshaw was the first quarterback to win three (1974, 1975 and 1978) and then four (1979) Super Bowls and led the Steelers to eight AFC Central championships. Robust, and with an arm that could launch a satellite into outer space, Bradshaw retired in 1983 with a record of 2,025 pass completions from 3,901 attempts, including 212 touchdown passes. Although that record equates to just a 51.9 per cent completion rating, it was Bradshaw's all-round performances, including his leadership on the field, that made him a Steelers legend. After football he got into acting and made several cameo appearances in films like *Smokey And The Bandit II*.

JOE SCHMIDT

08 If Schmidt's photo looks alarming enough then imagine the terror that he used to strike into the hearts of opposing offensive players when he faced them as linebacker for the Detroit Lions. A two-time NFL Champion (in 1953 and 1957) before the Super Bowl existed, Schmidt's toughness on and off the field meant that he bounced back quickly from injuries and his stopping abilities were recognised with ten Pro Bowl inclusions. When he retired in 1965, having spent 13 seasons playing with the Lions, Schmidt moved into a coaching role at the Lions before managing them two years later. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1973.



★ **Schmidt's achievements as both a player and a coach make him a Lions legend**



MORTEN ANDERSEN

09 Born in Copenhagen (and so nicknamed 'The Great Dane'), Morten Andersen holds the record for the most games played in the NFL (382) and is second in the list of all-time leading scorers in NFL history. Not only that, but he's also the all-time leading scorer for the New Orleans Saints and the second leading scorer for the Atlanta Falcons. First visiting the United States in 1977 as an exchange student, he so impressed as kicker for the Ben Davis High School team in Indianapolis that he was given a scholarship to Michigan State University. Famed for his bare-foot kicking style, Andersen kicked an outstanding 302 field goals for the Saints, including a 60-yarder against Chicago in 1991. He joined the Falcons in 1994 and became the first player to kick three field goals from over 50 yards in a game.

★ Offensive linesman Larry Allen was one of the strongest men to appear in the NFL

LARRY ALLEN

10 Regarded as one of the strongest men to have ever played professional football in the NFL (he recorded an official bench press of 705lbs and a squat of 905lbs), Larry Allen worked tirelessly as a guard for the Dallas Cowboys (1994-2005) and the San Francisco 49ers (2006-07). Recognised as one of the NFL's all-time greatest offensive linemen, Allen's physical might meant that he was able to play in most of the offensive line positions during his career. At various times, he played right tackle, right guard, left tackle and left guard, and he was also a victor at Super Bowl XXX when his Cowboys team triumphed over the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Having spent 12 seasons with the Cowboys, Allen played his final two with the 49ers before returning to sign a one-day contract with Dallas so that he could retire with the team that drafted him.

WALTER PAYTON

11 Running back Walter Payton started his professional NFL career with the Chicago Bears in 1975 and remained at Soldier Field for 13 seasons. During that time, Payton held records for the most career rushing yards, touchdowns, carries, yards from scrimmage and more. He helped the Bears win Super Bowl XX against the New England Patriots in 1985 and also proceeded to pick up two NFL MVP awards in a career in which he amassed over 16,726 rushing yards. Payton's motto was 'Never Die Easy', which he put into practice during matches by not making it easy for his tacklers by deliberately running out of bounds before being tackled. He retired in 1987 and passed away in 1999.

ERIC DICKERSON

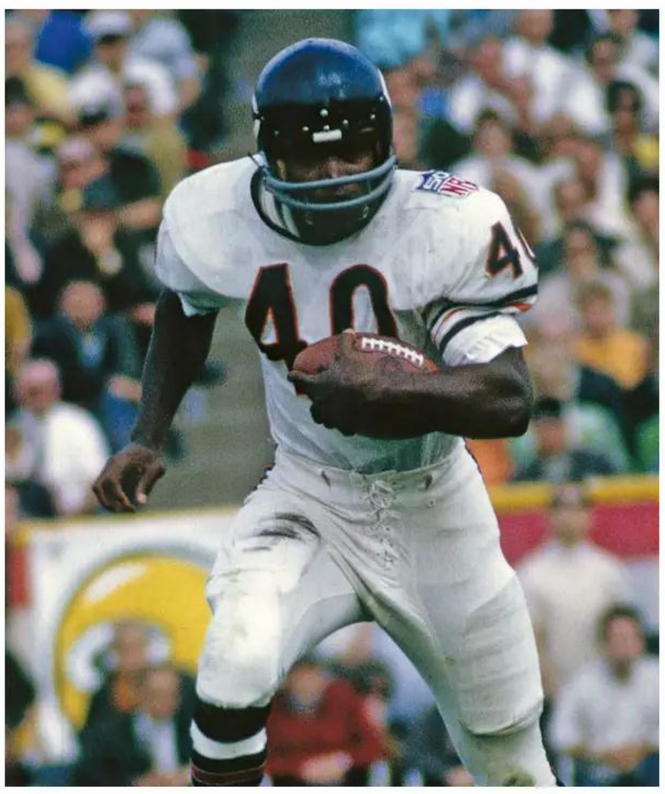
12 Spending 11 seasons in the NFL during the 1980s and 1990s as a running back, mainly for the Los Angeles Rams (but also with stints at the Indianapolis Colts, LA Raiders and Atlanta Falcons), Eric Dickerson holds the record for rushing in a single season with 2,105 yards, which he set in 1984.

After bursting onto the scene in 1983, Dickerson was the NFL rushing yards leader in his rookie season (in which he also picked up the NFL MVP and Rookie of the Year awards) and also in 1984, 1986 and 1988. Unsurprisingly, his running exploits led to him being selected for six Pro Bowl appearances and making five All-Pro first teams during this purple patch. Throughout the course of his career, Dickerson amassed a total of 13,259 rushing yards, scoring 90 touchdowns in the process. The only thing lacking from his playing resumé is a Super Bowl winner's ring. As his career wound down, Dickerson appeared for other NFL teams, but he will mostly be remembered with the horns of the LA Rams emblazoned on the side of his helmet as he charged down the field.

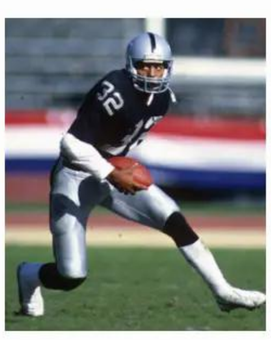
★ Blink and you'll miss him: Eric Dickerson on yet another surging run...

GALE SAYERS

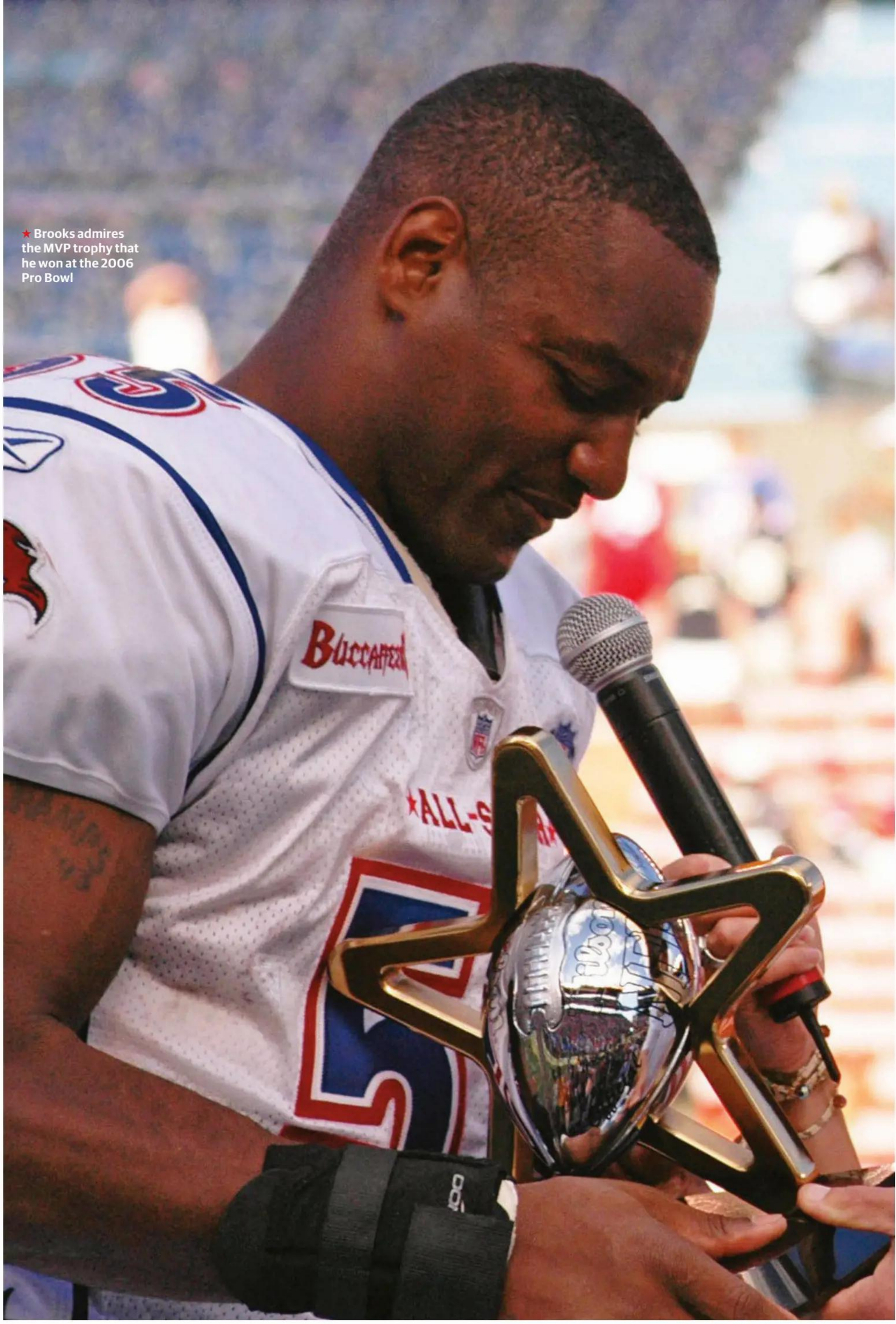
13 Known in his playing days as 'The Kansas Comet', Gale Sayers spent seven seasons in the NFL as running back for the Chicago Bears during the 1960s and 1970s. A member of the College Football Hall of Fame after his outstanding performances for the University of Kansas, Sayers was also inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1977, and is still the youngest person to be inducted in the Hall's history. During his career, Sayers set records for the most touchdowns in a rookie season (22 in 1965), the most touchdowns scored in a single game (six), the highest career kickoff return average (30.56) and the most return touchdowns in a game (two). After retiring from the game, Sayers became a successful entrepreneur in information technology.



MARCUS ALLEN



14 Allen was a mercurial talent on the gridiron field and played mainly as a running back for the Los Angeles Raiders (from 1982 to 1992) and the Kansas City Chiefs (from 1993 to 1997). Considered one of the best goal line and short-yard runners in NFL history, Allen rushed for a total of 12,243 yards over his career, caught 587 passes for a total of 5,412 yards and scored 145 touchdowns. He was also pretty handy at passing, completing 12 of 27 passes for 285 yards and six touchdowns. Allen won one Super Bowl (XVIII) in 1983.

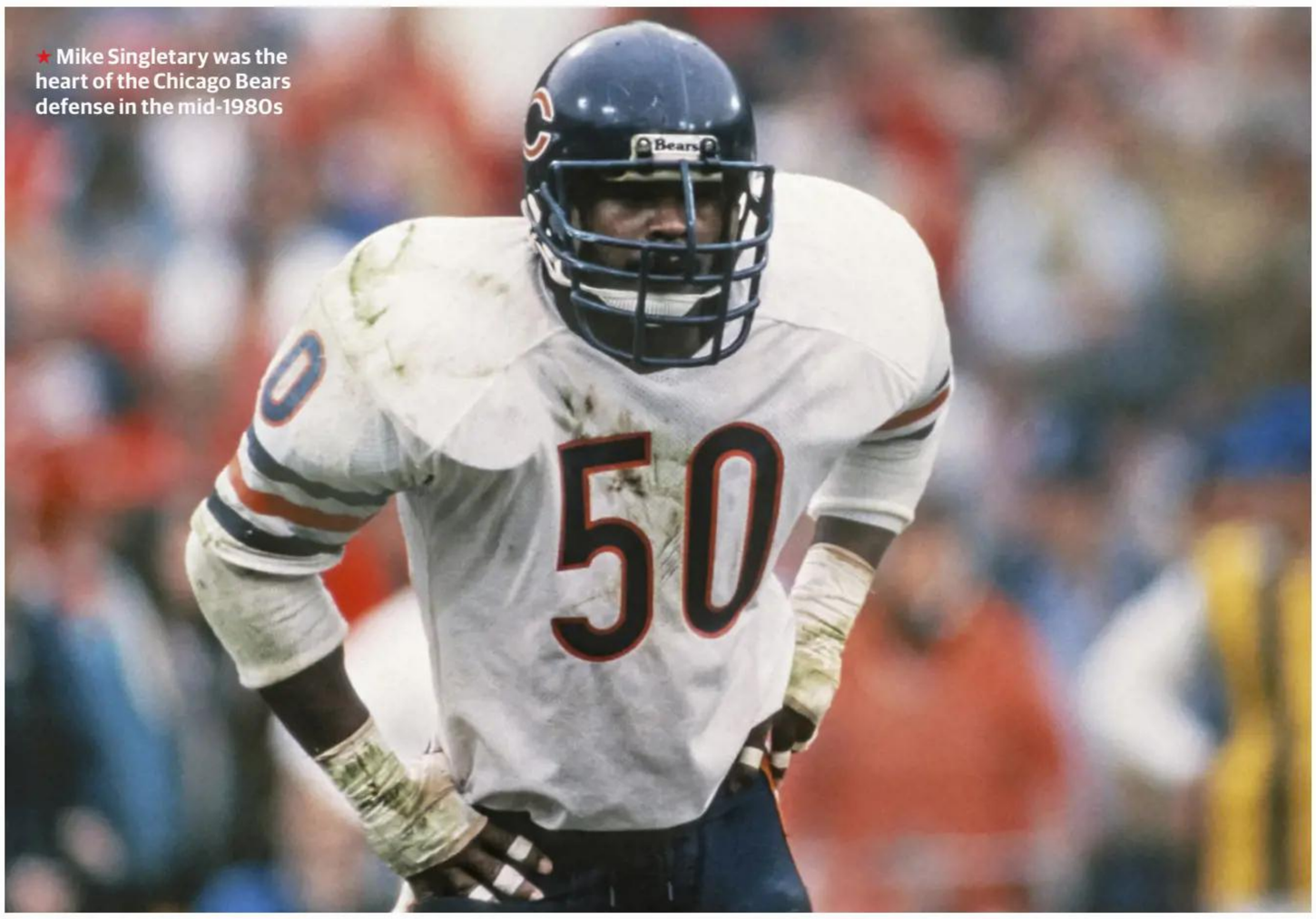


★ Brooks admires the MVP trophy that he won at the 2006 Pro Bowl

DERRICK BROOKS

15 After playing for Florida State University, linebacker Derrick Brooks was drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the first round of the 1995 draft and went on to spend his entire 14-season professional career there. During his time with the Buccaneers, Brooks made 1,715 tackles, made 13.5 quarterback sacks and 25 interceptions. He also pitched in on the scoresheet on occasion by scoring seven touchdowns – a respectable return for someone employed to stop the other team from scoring.

His immoveability as a linebacker meant that Brooks was selected for the Pro Bowl 11 times and voted as an All-Pro (one of the best players in his position as voted for by sports writers) on nine occasions. He was also named All-Pro NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 2002 and helped the Buccaneers win Super Bowl XXXVII in 2003 when they defeated the Oakland Raiders. Brooks retired from playing in 2008.



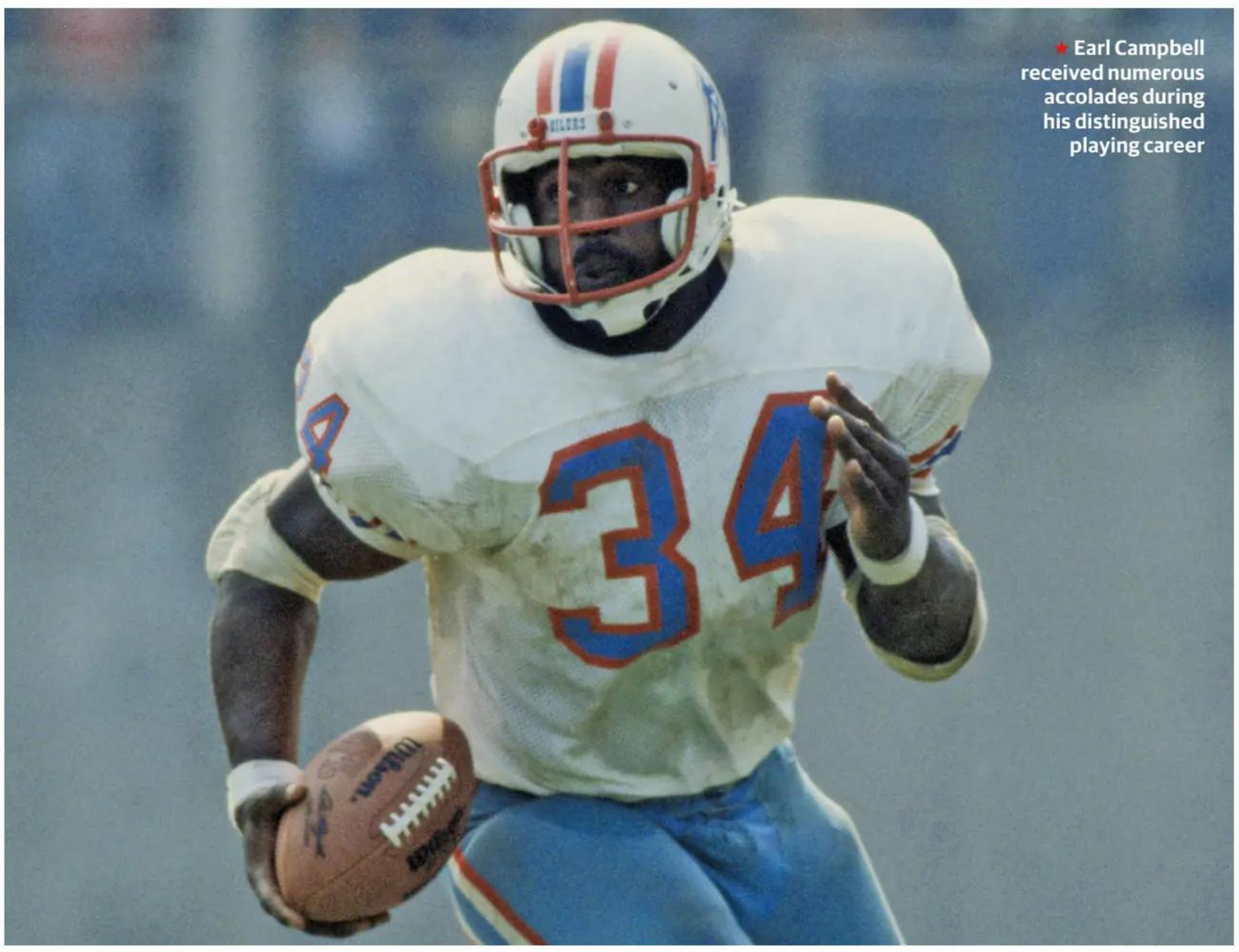
★ Mike Singletary was the heart of the Chicago Bears defense in the mid-1980s

MIKE SINGLETARY

16 So integral was Mike Singletary to the defensive line of the famous Super Bowl-winning Chicago Bears side of the mid-1980s that he was actually nicknamed 'The Heart of the Defense'. Singletary remained with the Bears throughout his entire playing career (from 1981 to 1992) and racked up a phenomenal 1,488 crunching tackles, 19 crucial quarterback sacks and seven interceptions. Inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999, Singletary moved into coaching after retiring from playing and was linebacker coach for the Baltimore Ravens and San Francisco 49ers before getting the main coaching gig at the latter. Unfortunately, he was then relieved of his position with one game remaining of the 2010 season. He still coaches today, and presumably never has to buy his own drinks in Chicago.

JOE NAMATH

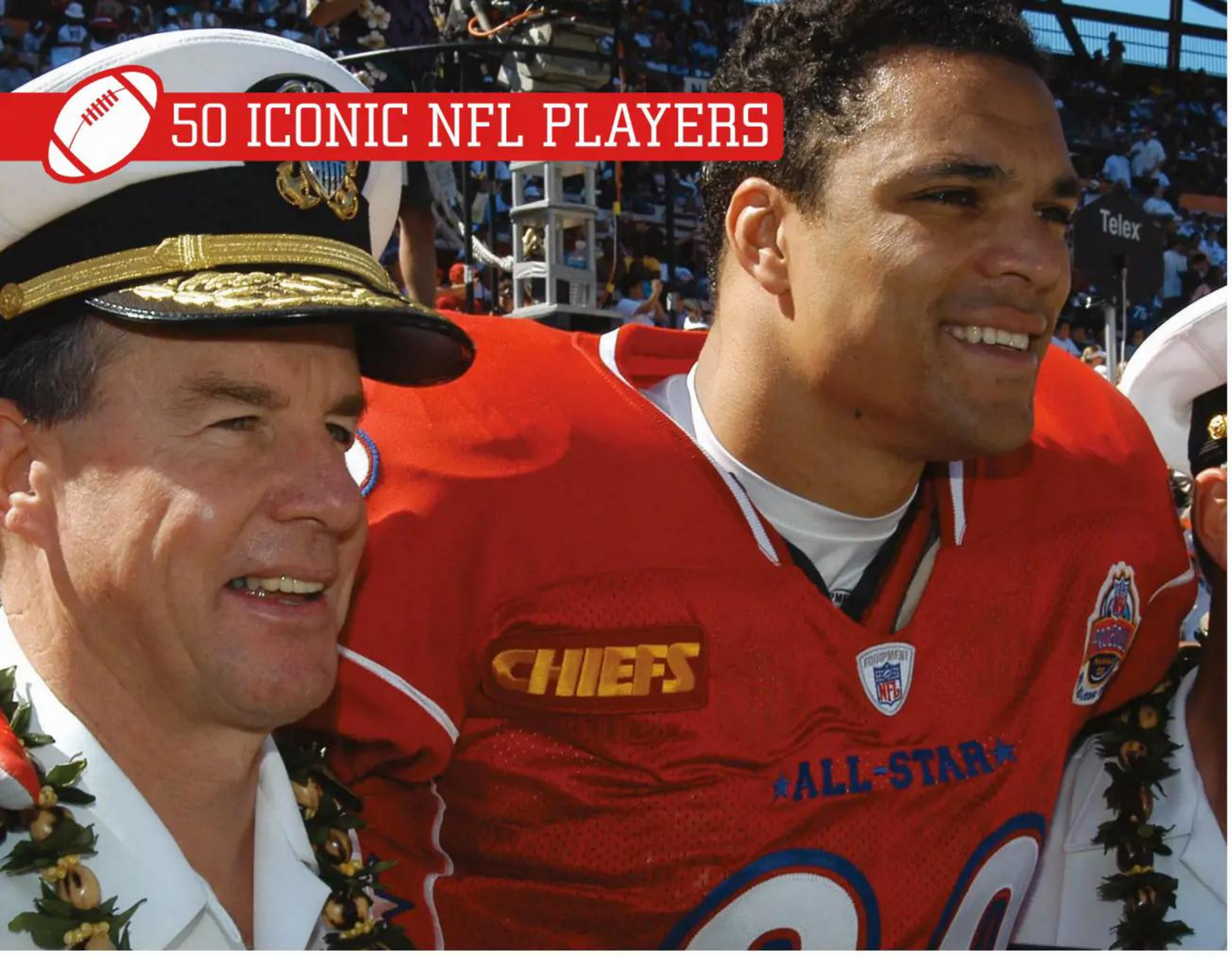
17 Quarterback Namath began his professional NFL career with the New York Jets in 1965 and spent 11 seasons with them before finishing off his playing days with one season at the Los Angeles Rams. A victor in Super Bowl III, Namath threw 173 touchdowns and completed 1,886 passes for 27,663 yards during his career. While these stats aren't exceptional, he was still inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and, during his playing days, Namath became the NFL's first real media superstar, something that would serve him well after he retired from pro football and moved into acting. He has appeared in numerous TV shows since the late 1970s, and is one of many sports stars immortalised in *The Simpsons*.



★ Earl Campbell received numerous accolades during his distinguished playing career

EARL CAMPBELL

18 Earl Campbell was the running back with the Houston Oilers who exploded onto the scene in 1978 when he led the NFL in rushing in each of his first three seasons – becoming the only player ever to do so. In his third season in the NFL, Campbell rushed for over 200 yards in four separate games, which is a record that still stands today. Staying with the Oilers until 1984, he had one season with the New Orleans Saints before retiring in 1985. His considerable talent couldn't yield a Super Bowl winner's ring, but he did appear in five Pro Bowls and received numerous other awards, including the NFL Most Valuable Player (three times), NFL Offensive Player of the Year (three times) and many more during a distinguished career.

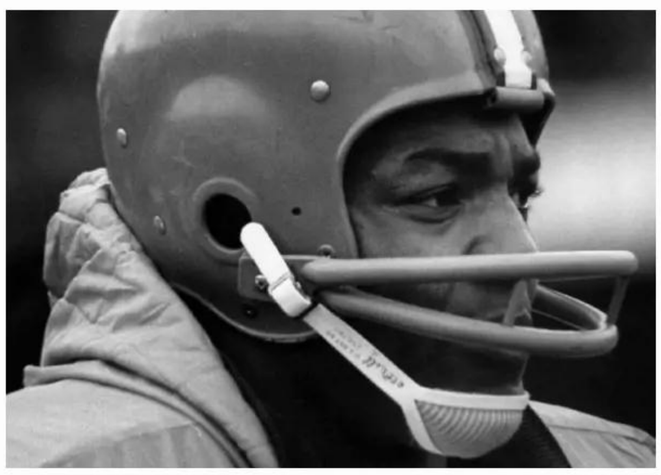


TONY GONZALEZ

19 A durable tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs and the Atlanta Falcons, Tony Gonzalez only missed two games during his entire 17-year NFL career. He also currently holds the NFL records for the most pass receptions (1,325), touchdown receptions (111) and total receiving yards (15,127) for a player in his position. In fact, following the start of the 2000 season, Gonzalez made 1,145 receptions with only one fumble, making him one of the safest pair of hands in NFL history. He was selected for 14 Pro Bowls and six All-Pro first teams during his career and after retiring from the game back in 2013 he made an effortless transition into football analysis and punditry, where he has worked for CBS, Fox and Amazon.

JIM BROWN

20 This fullback fittingly spent his entire career with the Cleveland Browns, from 1957 to 1965. Brown was the first player to reach the milestone of 100 rushing touchdowns and his record of 100 touchdowns scored in 93 games stood until 2006. He passed away in 2023.



JIM KELLY

21 With his no-huddle, 'K-Gun' offensive style, quarterback Jim Kelly led the Buffalo Bills to a record four consecutive Super Bowls from 1991 to 1994. Although they agonisingly lost all of them, Kelly was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2002.

★ LaDainian Tomlinson (with his distinctive dark visor) in action for the San Diego Chargers

LADAINIAN TOMLINSON

22 Identifiable from the dark visor he wore over the grid of his helmet to combat a sensitivity to light, LaDainian Tomlinson spent the majority of his 11-year NFL career as running back for the San Diego Chargers (from 2001-2009) before finishing at the New York Jets (2010-2011). He amassed a total of 13,684 rushing yards, scoring 145 touchdowns with his standout season coming in 2006 when he set several touchdown scoring records and received numerous honours, including the NFL's Most Valuable Player award.

OZZIE NEWSOME

23 The consumate, one-team professional, Ozzie Newsome played tight end for the Cleveland Browns from 1978 until 1990, during which time he made 662 pass receptions for a total of 7,980 yards, scoring 47 touchdowns. Though he never won the Super Bowl as a player, he has been victorious on two occasions as general manager of the Baltimore Ravens (at Super Bowls XXXV and XLVII). Newsome was selected for the Pro Bowl on three occasions and also made the NFL 1980s All-Decade Team. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999.

ART SHELL

24 As a no-nonsense offensive tackle for the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders, Art Shell holds the distinction of becoming only the second-ever African-American head coach in the history of pro football when he took over the reigns of his beloved Raiders after hanging up his boots in 1983. As a player, Shell played in 24 playoff contests and was on the winning side at Super Bowls XI and XV.

His hard-hitting exploits on the field were rewarded with eight call-ups for the Pro Bowl and he also featured in the NFL 1970s All-Decade Team. After moving into coaching, Shell won the Super Bowl again as coach of the Raiders when he masterminded their obliteration of the Washington Redskins at Super Bowl XVIII. He was also named NFL Coach of the Year in 1990. After leaving the Raiders in 1995, Shell also coached the Atlanta Falcons for three seasons before returning to manage the Raiders again in 2006, although this time the outcome was far from pleasing for both parties – he led the team to its worst record (of two wins and 14 defeats) since 1963. Shell was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1989 and in 1999 he was ranked number 55 on The Sporting News' list of the 100 Greatest Football Players.

DAN MARINO

25 Despite never being on a Super Bowl-winning team, Dan Marino is still recognised as being one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history. Fondly remembered for his quick release and powerful throwing arm, he spent his entire playing career (from 1983 to 1999) with the Miami Dolphins. Marino was the NFL's leader in passing yards from 1984 to 1986 – and also in the 1988 and 1992 seasons – and the touchdown passing leader from 1984-1986. Synonymous with the number 13 jersey (which the Dolphins retired in his honour), Marino threw a then-NFL record of 48 touchdown passes in only his second season, when the Dolphins got all the way to, and lost, Super Bowl XIX.

With his laser-guided throwing ability, Dan Marino was a Dolphins legend

STEVE YOUNG

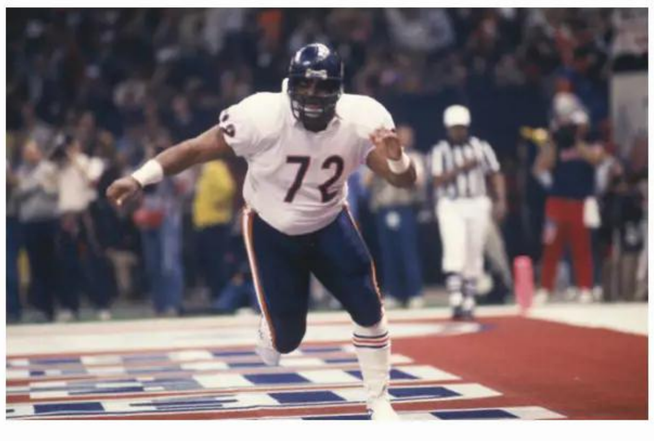
26 Young was a quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the 49ers. He won a record six NFL passer rating titles, and at the time of his retirement he had the highest passer rating in the NFL with 96.8 percent completion over 1,500 attempts.

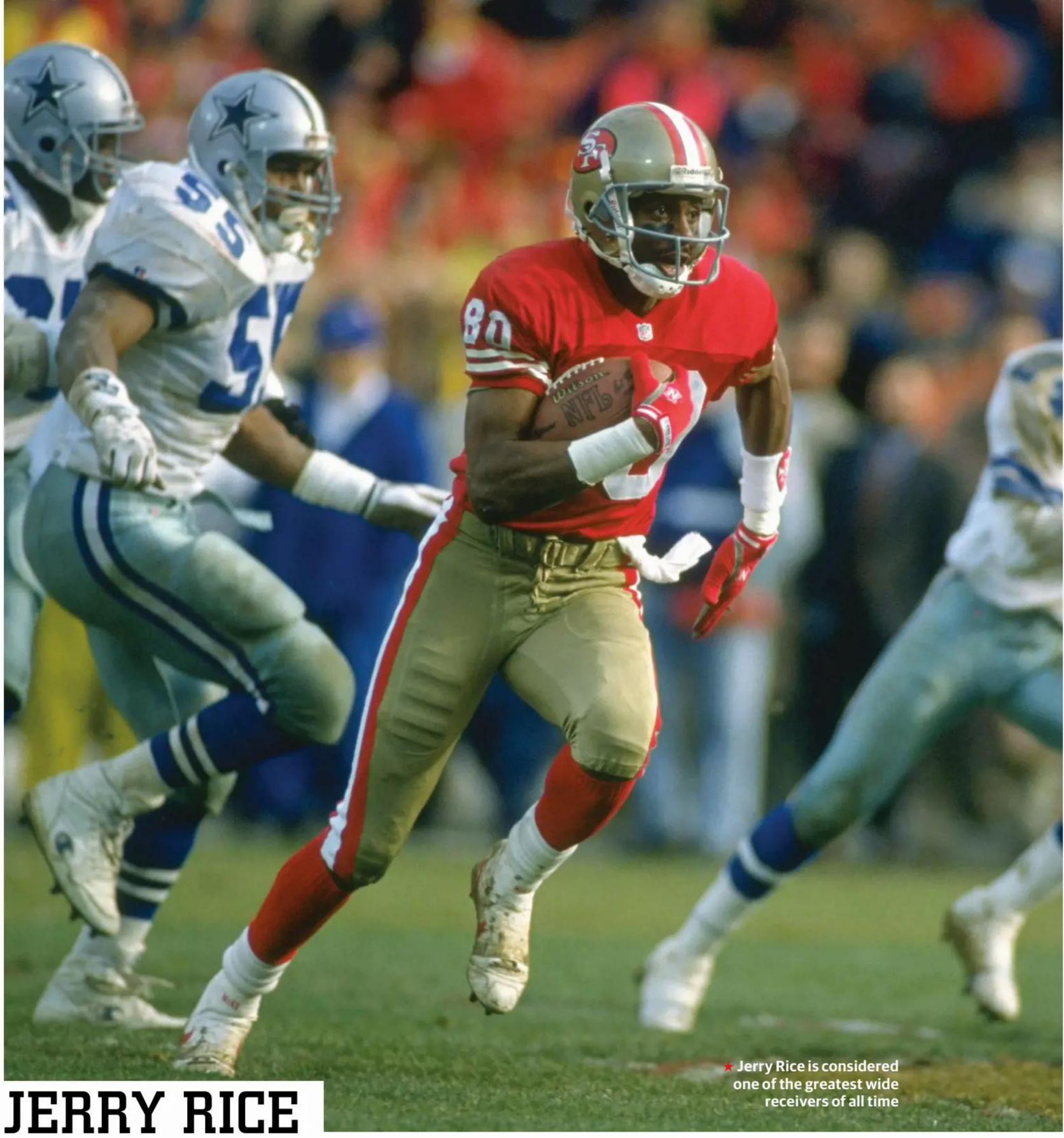
MIKE DITKA

27 'Iron' Mike Ditka is one of the few people to win a Super Bowl as a player, assistant coach and head coach. He managed these feats during his time with the Dallas Cowboys and the Chicago Bears. Bringing new versatility to the tight end position, Ditka was a potent offensive player, as well as offering plenty of robust blocking.

WILLIAM PERRY

28 Perry was a bruising defensive lineman with the Bears and the Eagles. His size (standing 6ft2in tall and weighing 335lbs) earned him the nickname 'The Refrigerator' and he became one of the most recognisable faces (or builds) in the sport.





★ Jerry Rice is considered one of the greatest wide receivers of all time

JERRY RICE

29 Widely considered to be the greatest wide receiver in NFL history, Jerry Rice played an incredible 20 seasons in the league, mainly for the San Francisco 49ers, but also for the Oakland Raiders and the Seatle Seahawks. Retiring in 2004, Rice is still the all-time leader in most wide receiver-related statistics, including pass receptions (1,540), touchdown receptions (197) and receiving yards (22,895).

Rice was a Super Bowl winner on three occasions with the 49ers and, after stints at the Raiders and Seahawks, he declined an initial one-year contract from the Denver Broncos at the end of the 2004 season, instead signing a one-day contract with the 49ers to allow him to retire as a member of the team where he began his career. Rice played 303 games in total, missing only 17 regular season games in his 20 professional seasons and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2010 in his first year of eligibility. The 49ers have since retired the number 80 jersey in his honour.

TROY AIKMAN

30 Quarterback Troy Aikman spent his entire playing career (from 1989 to 2000) with the Dallas Cowboys, and during this illustrious period he was selected for the Pro Bowl six times and led his team to three Super Bowl victories. He was named MVP at Super Bowl XXVII when his Dallas team trounced the Buffalo Bills.

Aikman was at the peak of his powers in the early 1990s, and in 1992 he set career highs in pass completions (302), passing yards (3,445) and touchdown passes (23) while leading the Cowboys to a team-record 13 victories in the regular season – the second best record in the NFC.

A magnet for heavy hits, Aikman was seemingly regularly struck down with concussion (he claims to remember very little about his Super Bowl XXVIII victory) and he was rotated with former Philadelphia Eagles quarterback, Randall Cunningham. However, a persistent back injury eventually forced him to retire at the end of the 2000 season.

MICHAEL IRVIN

31 Nicknamed 'The Playmaker' due to his penchant for making big plays in big games, Michael Irvin was a wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys from 1988 to 1999. Throughout a glittering playing career, Irvin won the Super Bowl three times (XXVII, XXVIII and XXX) and made 750 pass receptions over 11,904 yards, while also scoring 65 touchdowns. His career was ended during a game against the Philadelphia Eagles when he landed headfirst into the turf and suffered a serious spinal injury. Since retiring he has carved out a career in the sports media and has also appeared in several films, such as the 2005 remake of *The Longest Yard* starring Adam Sandler.

★ Family ties: Bruce Matthews (left) with his brother Clay

BRUCE MATTHEWS

32 An offensive tackle for the NFL's Oilers/Titans franchise, Bruce Matthews played offensive tackle for 19 seasons from 1983 to 2001 and comes from a football dynasty. His father, Clay Matthews Sr played in the NFL in the 1950s, and his brother, Clay Matthews Jr, played in the NFL for the Cleveland Browns at the same time as Bruce. What's more, Bruce is the uncle of the Green Bay Packers linebacker Clay Matthews III, Minnesota Vikings linebacker Casey Matthews and even his sons now play professional football for various teams – it must be in the blood. During his own career, Bruce was selected for 14 Pro Bowls, was included in the NFL's All-Decade team for the 1990s and had the honour of having his number 74 jersey retired by the Tennessee Titans when he stopped playing.

★ Running Back Tony Dorsett displayed plenty of fancy footwork on the field

TONY DORSETT

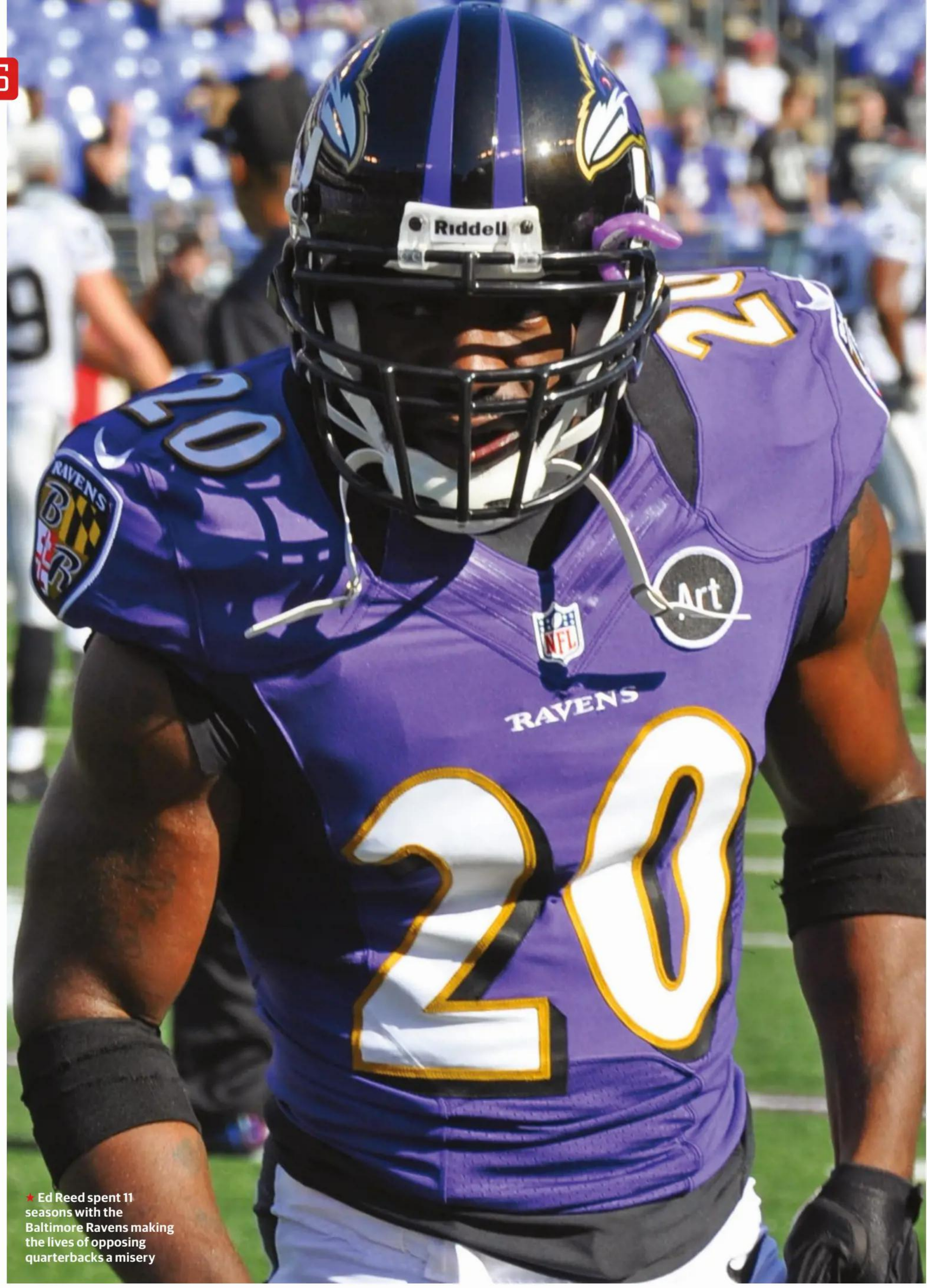
33 A running back for the Dallas Cowboys and the Denver Broncos, Tony Dorsett's NFL career began in 1977. He would go on to become a legend with the Cowboys, winning the NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year award in his first season and racking up over 12,000 rushing yards in his 11 seasons with the franchise. One of his defining moments came in a game against the St Louis Cardinals in 1980 when, on the four-yard line, he displayed some unbelievably fancy footwork to elude five hapless defenders and carry the football into the end zone without being touched, resulting in one of his 92 career touchdowns.

FRAN TARKENTON

34 In a career stretching from 1961 to 1978, Fran Tarkenton served as quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings and the New York Giants. Picked by the Vikings in the third round of the 1961 NFL Draft, in his first game Tarkenton came off the bench with his team trailing to the Chicago Bears and passed for 250 yards (including four touchdown passes) and rushed for a touchdown of his own to complete an unlikely comeback. He was the NFL's passing yards leader in 1978, made nine Pro Bowl appearances and picked up countless other awards in a career that ended with the Vikings retiring his number 10 jersey.

NORM VAN BROCKLIN

35 Nicknamed 'The Dutchman', Norm Van Brocklin played as a quarterback (and occasional punter) for the Los Angeles Rams and the Philadelphia Eagles during the 1950s. An accurate passer of the ball, Van Brocklin's career passing rating was 75.1, a stat that saw him selected for the Pro Bowl nine times and be awarded the NFL's MVP award in 1960. After retiring from playing, Van Brocklin moved into coaching and had stints coaching the Minnesota Vikings and Atlanta Falcons. He is fondly remembered as one of the game's more colourful personalities.



★ Ed Reed spent 11 seasons with the Baltimore Ravens making the lives of opposing quarterbacks a misery

ED REED

36 Picked by the Baltimore Ravens in the first round of the 2002 draft, defensive back Ed Reed played there for 11 seasons before joining the Houston Texans and then the New York Jets. He ultimately signed a one-day contract, as is quite common for legendary-status players, back at the Ravens to retire as a member of their squad. During his playing career, Reed made 643 tackles, 64 interceptions (returning them for a total of 1,590 yards – an all-time NFL record) and scored an incredible 13 touchdowns.

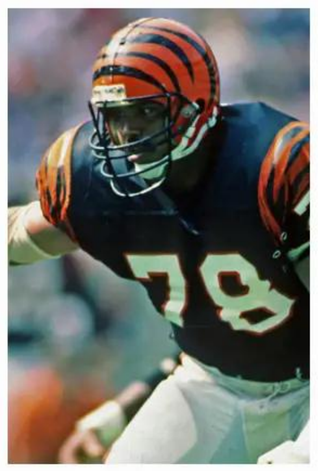
Reed was voted the NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 2004 and was selected in a total of nine Pro Bowls. Such was his professionalism that he was known to meticulously study films of his opposing teams to memorise their tendencies, and he was also noted for his ability to lure quarterbacks into making ill-judged passes that could be intercepted. After retiring from playing, Reed joined the Buffalo Bills as assistant defensive backs coach, where he is no doubt coaching a new generation of defensive linemen to read the game as well as himself.

ELROY HIRSCH

37 Known affectionately as 'Crazylegs' on account of his unusual running style, Elroy Hirsch was a well-known running back and receiver for the Los Angeles Rams and Chicago Rockets. Never heard of them? Well, this was back in the 1940s. Born in Wisconsin to German-Norwegian parents, Hirsch was drafted by the Rockets in 1946 and spent three injury-prone seasons in Chicago before moving to the Rams in 1949. It was in LA that Hirsch become famous, and he was one of the first players to wear the moulded plastic helmet that is now the industry standard. When playing for the Rockets, on one occasion he was tackled so severely that he tore his right knee ligaments and actually fractured his skull just above his right ear. So, when he eventually moved to the Rams, his coach fitted him for the helmet as a precaution.

Elroy Hirsch was pivotal to the Rams' 1951 NFL Championship-winning season with a record 1,495 yards receiving, which stood for the next 19 years, as well as 66 catches and 17 touchdowns in 12 games. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968 having racked up 387 receptions for 7,029 yards and 60 touchdowns across his playing career. After retiring, Hirsch became the director of athletics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, raising home attendance at their football games overnight.

ANTHONY MUÑOZ



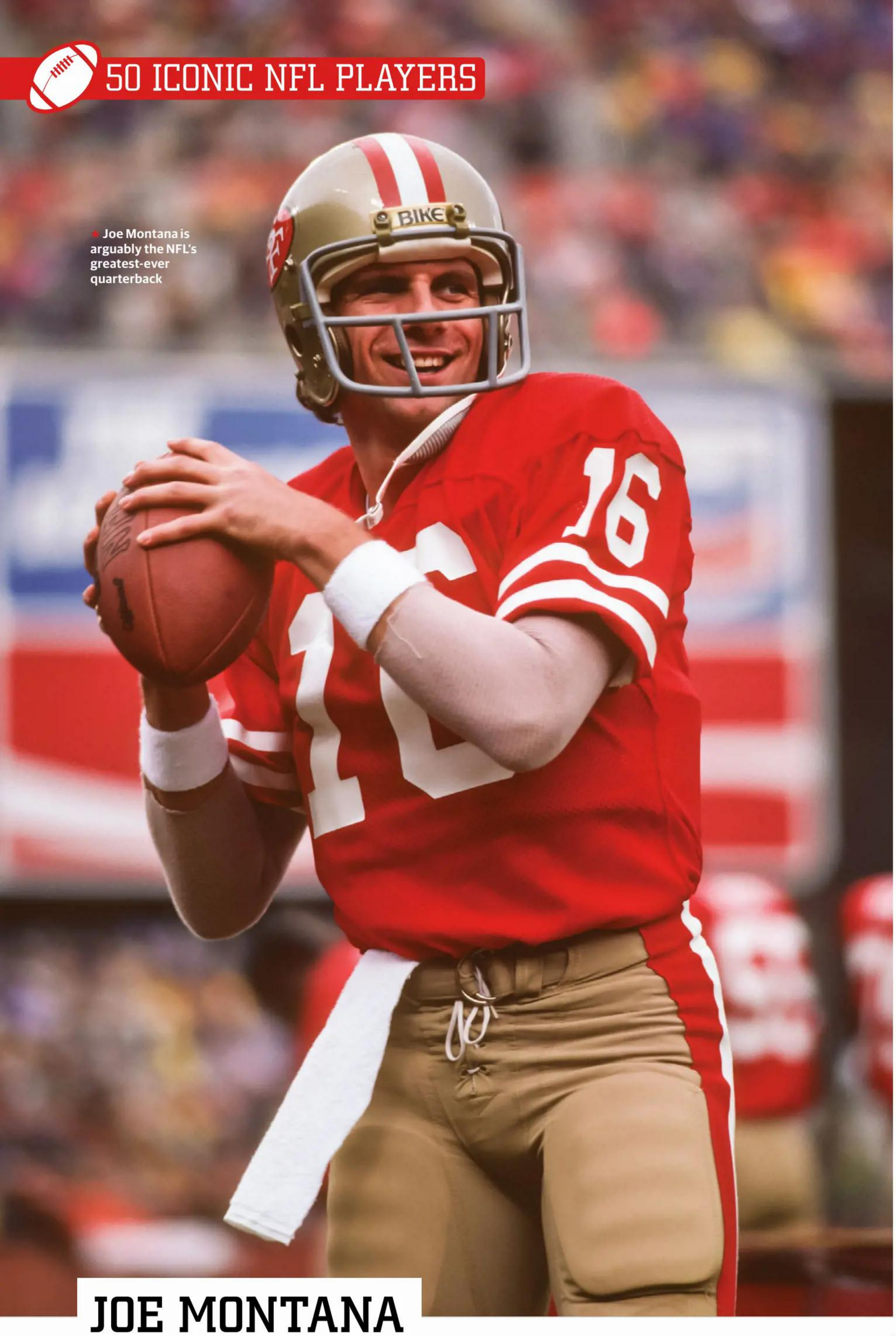
38 Widely considered to be one of the NFL's greatest ever offensive linemen, Anthony Muñoz played 13 seasons for the Cincinnati Bengals from 1980 to 1992. At the time of his retirement, Muñoz was tied with Tom Mack for the most ever Pro Bowl appearances by an offensive lineman and was the highest ranked lineman (at 17) when the *Sporting News* compiled its list of the 100 greatest football players. Muñoz also appeared in two motion pictures, one being 1983's *The Right Stuff*, which was nominated for an Academy Award.

★ Quarterback Peyton Manning was a five-time winner of the NFL MVP award

PEYTON MANNING

39 Quarterback Peyton Manning played for an incredible 18 seasons in the NFL – 14 with the Indianapolis Colts and four with the Denver Broncos. During that time he won the NFL MVP award five times and won the Super Bowl twice (once with each team). Coming from a rich dynasty of playmakers (his father was former Saints quarterback Archie Manning and his brother, Eli, was the quarterback for the New York Giants), Peyton Manning's career stats rank him up there with the very best to have played the game.

During his time with the Colts, Manning led them to eight division championships, two AFC championships and a Super Bowl championship (triumphing over the Chicago Bears at Super Bowl XLI). His five NFL MVP awards are a league record and he was named in 14 Pro Bowls, largely thanks to his 14 successful 4,000-yard passing seasons – which is also an NFL record. In winning Super Bowl 50 in his final game, Manning also became the first quarterback to achieve 200 career wins.



Joe Montana is arguably the NFL's greatest-ever quarterback

JOE MONTANA

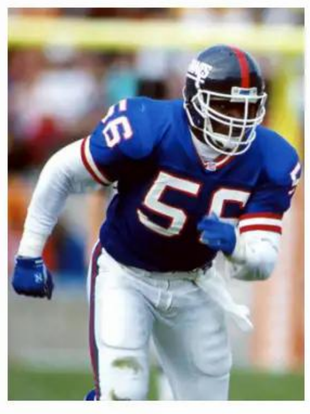
40 Few NFL quarterbacks can boast as influential a record as Joe Montana. Starting his career with the San Francisco 49ers in 1979, Montana spent 14 seasons with the west-coast team, guiding them to four Super Bowl victories and becoming the first player to ever be named Super Bowl Most Valuable Player three times. He also holds Super Bowl career records for the most passes without an interception (122 in four games) and holds the all-time highest quarterback rating of 127.8. He was a constant performer who relished the big games and was noted for his calmness under pressure, leading to one of his two nicknames of 'Joe Cool'.

With his ice-cool demeanour, Montana also earned the second of his nicknames, 'The Comeback Kid' thanks to his ability to dig deep and fashion wins for his team by coming from behind in the fourth quarter of no less than 31 games throughout his career, most notably at Super Bowl XXIII. With his team trailing to the Cincinnati Bengals, Montana orchestrated an incredible 92-yard drive that resulted in the game-winning touchdown for the 49ers with only 36 seconds left on the clock. One of the true legends of the field.

ROB GRONKOWSKI

41 A physical monster on the field and a larger-than-life personality off it, 'Gronk' revolutionised the tight end position. A four-time Super Bowl champion who was a formidable defensive blocker as well as being perhaps the greatest receiver ever at the TE position, Gronkowski formed a deadly partnership with Tom Brady as part of the Patriots dynasty throughout the 2010s. After retiring in 2019, he partnered with Brady again in Tampa Bay, and duly won his fourth ring, catching two TDs in the Super Bowl and becoming the first player to catch a pass in five editions of the showpiece game.

LAWRENCE TAYLOR



42 Playing his entire professional career as a linebacker with the New York Giants (from 1981-1993), Lawrence Taylor produced double-figure sack statistics in each season from 1984 to 1990. This run included a career-best of 20.5 in 1986, the year that he won his first of two Super Bowl titles with the Giants. That year, Taylor also became the first defensive player in history to win the NFL Most Valuable Player (MVP) award. Such was Taylor's immense standing in the game that not even suspensions for substance abuse could tarnish his reputation as one of the best defensive players to ever grace the NFL.

REGGIE WHITE

43 During his 15 seasons in the NFL, not a lot got past Reggie White. The two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year played as defensive end for the Philadelphia Eagles, Green Bay Packers and the Carolina Panthers, during which he racked up 198 career quarterback sacks, putting him second on the all-time list. In fact, during his Eagles career, White actually accumulated more sacks than the number of games he played.

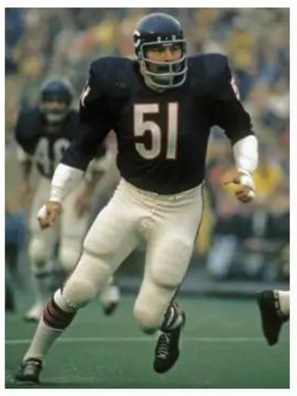
When he moved to the Packers in 1993, White scored a further 68.5 crunching quarterback sacks to become the team's all-time highest sacker at the time, as well as helping his team win Super Bowl XXXI. Selected for 13 Pro Bowls, White's influence was such that he had his number 92 jersey retired by both the Eagles and the Packers.

★ Reggie White: so good that two teams retired his jersey

RAY LEWIS

44 Considered one of the greatest linebackers of all time, Lewis began his NFL career with the Baltimore Ravens in 1996 (in the team's inaugural season) and stayed with them for his entire 17-year playing stretch in the league. During his playing days the accolades rained like confetti and Lewis was selected for 13 Pro Bowls, named as an Associated Press All-Pro ten times, won the NFL Defensive Player of the Year award twice and was also only the second ever linebacker to win the Super Bowl MVP award (the first to win it on the winning team) when the Ravens triumphed at Super Bowl XXXV in 2000.

During that season, Lewis led a water-tight defense that set a 16-game single-season record for the fewest points allowed (165) and the fewest rushing yards allowed (970) – he was a hard man to get around. After an unfortunate triceps tear sidelined him for a large proportion of the 2012-13 season, Lewis returned just in time for the Ravens' playoff run that extended all the way to Super Bowl XLVII, where they triumphed over the San Francisco 49ers.



DICK BUTKUS

45 Widely regarded as one of the best and most durable linebackers of all time, Dick Butkus played nine seasons in the NFL (from 1965-73) for the Chicago Bears and intimidated opposing players with this size and hard-hitting tackling ability. Though he never appeared at the Super Bowl, Butkus's defensive prowess was recognised with eight Pro Bowl appearances and two NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards. After retiring, Butkus moved into acting and some people may remember him more for appearances in *Murder She Wrote* and *Magnum PI* than his antics on the pitch. But for older Bears fans and those who appreciate a crunching tackle, Butkus will always be an NFL legend.

BART STARR

46 The modern NFL's first celebrity, the aptly named Starr became the first quarterback to win a Super Bowl when he lead the Packers to victory over the Chiefs. He then went on to repeat the feat a year later, being named MVP on both occasions. Over a 15-year playing career, Starr remained loyal to Green Bay, delivering five championships – a feat not equalled until 2017. Though his coaching career was less successful, it didn't take any of the shine off his playing achievements. Starr became a Hall of Famer in 1977, and the Packers have retired his number 15 jersey .

★ After the heartache, John Elway would eventually win the championships that his talent merited

JOHN ELWAY

47 For a time during the late 1980s, it looked as though John Elway, the quarterback for the Denver Broncos would always be the bridesmaid and never the bride. After trips to Super Bowl XXI, XXII and XXIV, Elway finished on the losing team every time and despite being a consistent performer, it would take a dramatic slump in his team's fortunes and something of a rebirth before his talent would yield the ultimate prize.

Spending his entire 16-year career with the Broncos, Elway clocked up an impressive array of records before retiring in 1999. But it was a particular play during an AFC Championship Game against the Cleveland Browns in 1987 that proved to be his defining moment on the field. Elway helped to engineer a 98-yard game-tying touchdown drive that propelled the Broncos to Super Bowl XXI against the New York Giants. The Broncos would, crushingly, lose that game but Elway did eventually become a double champion at Super Bowls XXXII and XXXIII.

DEION SANDERS

48 Sanders played a range of positions for a host of different NFL teams. In stints with the Atlanta Falcons, San Francisco 49ers, Dallas Cowboys, Washington Redskins and Baltimore Ravens, he played cornerback, kick returner, punt returner and wide receiver. Amazingly, to further highlight Sanders' 'all-rounder' status, he also managed to balance a parallel sporting career and played baseball professionally for the New York Yankees, Atlanta Braves, Cincinnati Reds and the San Francisco Giants. He is still the only man to play in both a Super Bowl (winning Super Bowl XXIX with the 49ers and XXX with the Cowboys) and a World Series (with the Braves in 1992). In 1994, the same year he won the Super Bowl with the San Francisco 49ers, he was voted Defensive Player of the Year.

BRETT FAVRE

49 Over his long and distinguished playing career, Favre's stats place him up there with the NFL's very best quarterbacks. He was the first quarterback to complete over 6,000 passes, throw for over 70,000 yards and pass for 500 touchdowns. Drafted by the Atlanta Falcons in 1991, Favre was traded to the Green Bay Packers in 1992 and seized his opportunity to impress after an injury ruled out the Packers' starting quarterback, Don 'Majik Man' Majkowski. Incredibly, he then started every game for the Packers through to the end of the 2007 season and, subsequently, for the New York Jets and Minnesota Vikings to take his consecutive starts record to 321 (including playoff matches). Favre has led his teams to eight division championships and two Super Bowls (XXXI and XXXII), the first of which he won when the Packers defeated the New England Patriots.

TOM BRADY

50 If there were any doubts over Tom Brady's status as one of, if not the, greatest quarterback of all time, his seventh Super Bowl triumph in his first season with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers surely laid them to rest. It was Brady's tenth trip to the NFL's showpiece game, following nine with the New England Patriots – more than any other player. Starting his career in 2000, Brady has won multiple league MVP and Super Bowl MVP awards, as well holding records in almost every major statistical category for the playoffs and the Super Bowl. Brady's name has become synonymous with the Patriots, however, in March 2020, at the age of 42, he signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Despite the Bucs coming off a losing record in 2019, Brady duly led them to their second NFL title at Super Bowl LV. He spent two more seasons in Florida (including a swiftly reversed retirement in 2022) before finally hanging up his cleats for good in 2023 as the most decorated player in NFL history.

★ Tom Brady won six Super Bowls during his 20-year career with the New England Patriots

10 GREATEST NFL GAMES OF ALL TIME

Home to some of the biggest sporting contests in history, the NFL is proof positive of how impactful sport can be at its best

There's a reason the NFL is one of the world's most watched sporting leagues. Showcasing an athletic spectacle that manages to capture the imagination of even the most casual fan, it has been responsible for some truly memorable moments since its inception in 1920. Year after year in the NFL, heroes are born and legends are made, and the actions of both individuals and teams have contributed to some truly stunning contests.

From records being broken to underdogs upsetting the odds, the NFL has played host to some spectacular games down the years. They're milestones of the sporting world that deserve recognition, not only because of the outstanding skill on display, but because of the emotional resonance that these sporting achievements hold for so many people. With all that in mind, over the next few pages we present ten of the very best NFL games ever played for your reading pleasure.

'THE GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED'

01 **When a game is dubbed 'the greatest ever', it's natural to take the statement with a grain of salt.** Fortunately, the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants did more than enough to justify such hyperbole when they met in the 1958 NFL Championship game. Ironically, the contest began poorly when Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas fumbled on the first play. By the end of the second quarter, however, Baltimore had fought to a 14-3 lead. What followed was better than any Hollywood movie. As New York found its feet and put 17 points on the board, the match seemed over with only seven seconds left on the clock. That was until Colts kicker Steve Myhra converted a 20-yard field goal to tie the game and ensure the match became the first in playoff history to go to overtime.

With millions watching on TV, Baltimore running back Alan Ameche scored a one-yard touchdown to give his team victory. To this day, it's claimed that this was the moment the NFL's popularity took off.

SCORE: Baltimore Colts 23 – 17 New York Giants
GAME: NFL Championship
DATE: 28 December 1958
VENUE: Yankee Stadium, New York

★ No one could've predicted before the game how intense a match Super Bowl XLIII would've become

THE 100-YARD INTERCEPTION

02 Records are meant to be broken, but in 2009 during Super Bowl XLIII, Pittsburgh Steelers outside linebacker James Harrison set one in the most dramatic fashion possible. After Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner's wayward pass ended up in the arms of Harrison in his own end zone, he ran 100 yards for a then-record interception return touchdown. Aside from highlighting just how in-sync and well-oiled the Steelers were as a team – everyone on the field did everything they could to clear Harrison's path – it also sent them into half-time with a 17-7 lead.

This alone would have been enough to make Super Bowl XLIII a game to remember, but Arizona returned to the field with renewed purpose. While they struggled in the third quarter, things picked up in the fourth. Warner, wanting to make up for his earlier error, inspired his team to 16 consecutive points, including wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald's 64-yard touchdown reception. It took the game to 23-20 with only 2:37 remaining. It was quickly becoming a game of one-upmanship, but there was yet another twist to come.

It appeared the Cardinals had cemented a terrific comeback, but Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger had other ideas. Working near-perfectly with wide receiver Santonio Holmes, who he found four times in a 78-yard drive, Big Ben found Holmes for the game-winning touchdown with a pass that many consider one of the best ever thrown in a Super Bowl. With the championship secured, Pittsburgh became the first team in history to win six Super Bowls, adding yet another record to the books.

A game full of highlights that are still exhilarating to watch today, Super Bowl XLIII managed to secure 98.7 million viewers, making it one of the most watched events in broadcast history. Easily one of the best finals that the NFL has ever witnessed, it's a contest that gets better every time you watch it.

SCORE: Pittsburgh Steelers 27 – 23 Arizona Cardinals
GAME: Super Bowl XLIII
DATE: 1 February 2009
VENUE: Raymond James Stadium, Tampa, FL

NAMATH'S JETS DEFY THE ODDS

SCORE: New York Jets 16 – 7 Baltimore Colts
GAME: Super Bowl III
DATE: 12 January 1969
VENUE: Orange Bowl, Miami, FL

03 Nothing beats a good underdog story. Before Super Bowl III, everyone had predicted a walkover victory for the dominant Baltimore Colts. Part of the NFL – which was considered the superior league – the Colts had crushed their opposition that year, finishing the 1968 season with a record of 13-1. On the flip-side were the AFL's New York Jets. Fighting their way to the main event with far less momentum, the Jets squeaked their way through to the Super Bowl thanks to a 27-23 win over the Oakland Raiders. On paper, there was only going to be one champion that year.

So when Jets quarterback Joe Namath came out three days prior to the event to arrogantly declare his team would win, everyone took it for what they assumed it was: big words from a man who knew his team didn't have a chance. As it turned out, he couldn't have been more right.

Not only did the Jets control most of the game, but by the fourth quarter they had built up a 16-0 lead. Even more surprising was that they only scored one touchdown throughout the game – provided by running back Matt Snell – a Super Bowl final record that still holds true to this day (the rest of the Jets' points were provided thanks to three field goals by kicker Jim Turner). By the time Colts running back Jerry Hill pulled a touchdown back in the closing minutes, the damage had already been done.

Namath walked away as the game's MVP, completing 17 out of 28 passes for a total of 206 yards, even without throwing a single pass in the last quarter, since he knew well that it was better to err on the side of caution than give up what was a significant lead. The Jets had systemically picked holes in the Colts' defense. It was a historic night for all involved, and a game that any fan owes it to themselves to see.

★ **Super XLII was the first of two victories over the Patriots by the Giants and quarterback Eli Manning**

AN IMPERFECT PERFECT RECORD

04 It all seemed hopeless for the New York Giants. Not only had their Super Bowl opponents the New England Patriots gone unbeaten for the entire season with a record of 18-0, but they were the heavy favourites in the biggest game of the year. With the score 14-10 in favour of the Patriots late in the fourth quarter, however, New York embarked on a drive that would not only earn them the Super Bowl that year, but cement this game has one of the biggest upsets in NFL history.

With the ball on their own 17-yard line and just 2:37 left on the clock, the Giants battled almost the entire length of the field to score a game-winning touchdown when wide receiver Plaxico Burress planted the ball down with only 35 seconds remaining. 97.5 million people tuned in to what many consider to be one of the best Super Bowls in history.

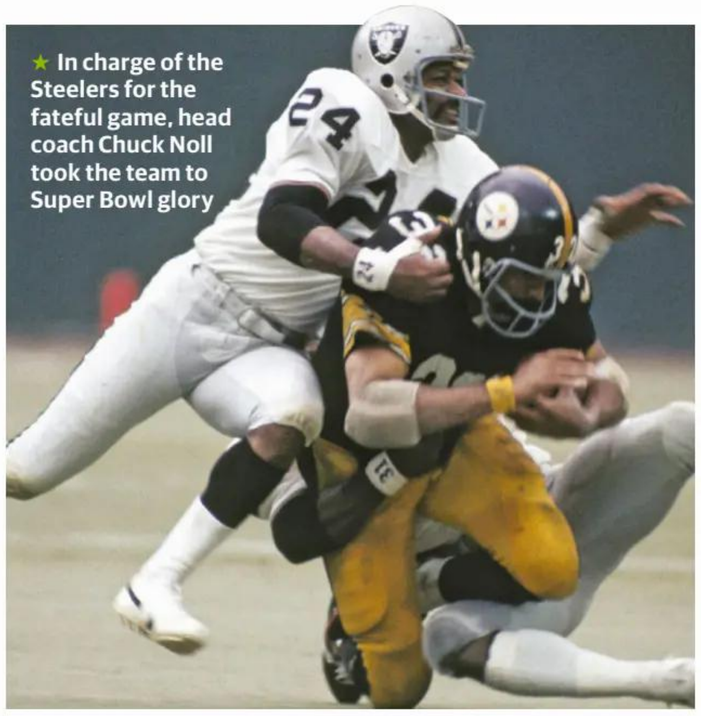
SCORE: New York Giants 17 – 14 New England Patriots
GAME: Super Bowl XLII
DATE: 3 February 2008
VENUE: University Of Phoenix Stadium, AZ

★ **The overturning of the decision after Brady got sacked is one of the biggest moments in the Patriots' history**

THE POWER OF THE 'TUCK' RULE

05 Arguably the game where the New England Patriots' current dynasty began, it all came down to a single call. With the Patriots down by three and the game rapidly drawing to a close, QB Tom Brady was sacked by Raiders linebacker Greg Biekert. To most this was an obvious fumble. But the officials saw it a little differently. Deciding it was an incomplete pass – despite Brady seemingly trying to 'tuck' the ball back into his body and thereby halting his throw attempt – control was given back to the Patriots. From this they got into position for kicker Adam Vinatieri to convert an incredible 45-yard field goal to tie things up. New England not only won in overtime, but went on to claim the Super Bowl XXXVI championship.

SCORE: Oakland Raiders 13 – 16 New England Patriots
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 19 January 2002
VENUE: Foxboro Stadium, MA



★ In charge of the Steelers for the fateful game, head coach Chuck Noll took the team to Super Bowl glory

THE IMMACULATE RECEPTION

06 The 'Immaculate Reception' is one of the most famous plays in NFL history. Why? Mostly because it still creates controversy today. With the Oakland Raiders ahead in the dying seconds of the fourth quarter, the 1972 AFC divisional playoff seemed done and dusted. When Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw launched a pass to running back John Fuqua, though, everything changed.

Depending on who you choose to believe, the ball either bounced off Fuqua, the ground or Raiders safety Jack Tatum. The officials decided it was the last of these, allowing Pittsburgh fullback Franco Harris to grab the ball and run into the end zone to score a TD and ultimately win the game.

Some fans still contend that either Fuqua or the turf interfered first. If that were the case, the pass should have been ruled as incomplete. Given the contention, this face-off remains a treat to watch, if only to continually observe the game-changing play and wonder what might have been had it been called differently.

Regardless, this dispute did wonders for the Steelers. Not only did it secure their first playoff win ever, but it fuelled them to four Super Bowl victories before the decade was done. If the call had gone the other way, who knows what fate would have awaited the 'Men of Steel'.

SCORE: Oakland Raiders 7 – 13 Pittsburgh Steelers
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 23 December 1972
VENUE: Three Rivers Stadium, Pittsburgh, PA

THE ICE BOWL

07 The 1967 NFL Championship game had everything: two teams that had genuine beef with each other, unreal conditions that led it to forever being dubbed as the 'Ice Bowl', and a dramatic climax that ensured this was a match for the ages. With the Packers driven forward by legendary coach Vince Lombardi, temperatures sunk to -26°C, a factor that had a huge, and negative, effect on the players.

Even so, the two teams squared off as everyone assumed they would. Despite jumping to a 14-0 lead within the first two quarters, the Packers would let it slide as Dallas fought back with 17 consecutive points. During the game's final minutes, though, Packers quarterback Bart Starr inspired a tremendous drive that covered 68 yards and took his team right into the end zone. The last step of this came from Starr himself, running a quarterback sneak to not only secure the touchdown, but send Green Bay through to Super Bowl II, in which it went on to claim victory a few weeks later.

SCORE: Dallas Cowboys 17 – 21 Green Bay Packers
GAME: NFL Championship Game
DATE: 31 December 1967
VENUE: Lambeau Field, Green Bay, WI

★ Conditions were so bad during the 1967 championship game that afterwards the players were emotionally spent.

THE EPIC IN MIAMI

08 By the end of the first quarter, the San Diego Chargers were up 24-0 in their AFC divisional playoff against the Miami Dolphins. To say the world wrote the Dolphins off at that point would be an understatement – the feeling in the Orange Bowl was one of embarrassment. Until the second quarter, that is. After Dolphins head coach Don Shula switched quarterback David Woodley out for Don Strock, the game took a drastic turn. Opening his account with a 17-yard pass to Duriel Harris, this play also resulted in Miami's first points after a 34-yard field goal was converted by kicker Uwe von Schamann. From there it was all-out war.

By the end of the third quarter the Dolphins had, quite incredibly, managed to score 31 points. It took a touchdown from Chargers running back James Brooks with only 58 seconds left on the clock to tie the game and, even more spectacularly, a last-second field goal block from Chargers tight end Kellen Winslow to take things through to overtime.

While the Chargers would go on to win this divisional playoff game, the sheer drama and number of records set in one evening is what makes it an all-time classic, now known as the 'Epic in Miami'.

SCORE: San Diego Chargers 41 – 38 Miami Dolphins
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 2 January 1982
VENUE: Orange Bowl, Miami, FL

★ A last-minute field goal block would take the game to overtime

★ Garo Yepremian's kick finally secured the win for the Dolphins

THE LONGEST GAME IN NFL HISTORY

09 Game length is not necessarily an indication of quality, but there was so much at stake when the Miami Dolphins came up against the Kansas City Chiefs in the 1971 AFC playoffs that it seemed like it was destined to be a classic.

With the Chiefs going up 10-0 in the first quarter, the Dolphins responded in kind during the second. Throughout the third and fourth they pushed each other to the limit, scoring touchdowns that came within a heartbeat of each other. This took the game into overtime, where even an intercepted pass courtesy of Dolphins safety Jake Scott couldn't break the Chiefs' defense down.

At 7:40 of the second overtime period, however, Miami kicker Garo Yepremian converted a field goal to secure the win. The time on the clock was 82 minutes and 40 seconds.

SCORE: Miami Dolphins 27 – 24 Kansas City Chiefs
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 25 December 1971
VENUE: Municipal Stadium, Kansas City, MO

★Tom Brady, Julian Edelman and David Andrews celebrate pulling off the most unlikely of victories

THE COMEBACK TO END ALL COMEBACKS

10 28-3 is a scoreline that will haunt every Atlanta Falcons fan until the end of their days. 28-3 was the score, in the Falcons' favour, with a little over two minutes left of the third quarter in Super Bowl LI. The New England Patriots had been unable to contain the rampant Atlanta offense, led by league MVP Matt Ryan, and were staring defeat in the face.

At one point, Vegas had the Falcons' chances of winning at 99.8 per cent. Three teams had previously overcome a deficit of 10 points to win a Super Bowl – the Patriots had done it themselves in 2015 – but 25? It wasn't just improbable, it was unthinkable, laughable. It shouldn't have been possible.

Not for Bill Belichick's Pats team. Not for Tom Brady. A pair of James White touchdowns, a Danny Amendola score, a Stephen Gostkowski field goal and one breathtaking Julian Edelman catch later, and the scores were level. For the first time ever, the Super Bowl would be decided in overtime.

From that point on, the outcome was inevitable. Brady and White combined to produce a 75-yard drive, and the latter ran in his third touchdown of the night to clinch victory. It was the first time the Patriots had led the game.

Super Bowl LI set records which, in all likelihood, will stand for decades. It might still be fresh in the memory, but it's already reached mythic status. Few would argue against it as the greatest game in the history of the NFL.

SCORE: New England Patriots 34 – 28 Atlanta Falcons
GAME: Super Bowl LI
DATE: 5 February 2017
VENUE: NRG Stadium, Houston, TX

ion CAMERA
LOCKER ROOM CAM
[ ]
THANK YOU 12s
HAWKS NEST
HomeStreet Bank
40
CAPTION WINDOW
Regence
Regence
redbox.
NEW RELEASE movies & games
KICK OFF REDBOX MOVIE NIGHT!
94
76
77

MEET THE TEAMS

78. BUFFALO BILLS
80. MIAMI DOLPHINS
82. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
84. NEW YORK JETS
86. BALTIMORE RAVENS
88. CINCINNATI BENGALS
90. CLEVELAND BROWNS
92. PITTSBURGH STEELERS
94. HOUSTON TEXANS
96. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS
98. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS
100. TENNESSEE TITANS
102. DENVER BRONCOS
104. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS
106. LAS VEGAS RAIDERS
108. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS
110. DALLAS COWBOYS
112. NEW YORK GIANTS
114. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
116. WASHINGTON COMMANDERS
118. CHICAGO BEARS
120. DETROIT LIONS
122. GREEN BAY PACKERS
124. MINNESOTA VIKINGS
126. ATLANTA FALCONS
128. CAROLINA PANTHERS
130. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS
132. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS
134. ARIZONA CARDINALS
136. LOS ANGELES RAMS
138. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS
140. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

From Buffalo and New England to Seattle and San Francisco, get the lowdown on the upcoming season with our detailed profiles on every NFL team

The NFL is the sum of many parts – the organisation, the culture, the fans, the media – but ultimately it comes down to the teams competing on the field, week in, week out. It's here that individual skill and collective excellence combine to produce some of the fiercest, most competitive, and most entertaining contests in sport.

The teams are the heart and soul of the NFL, and each has its own strengths, weaknesses, legendary figures and fierce rivalries. From storied franchises that have fallen on hard times to promising teams built around a core of bright young talent, football is home to championship-winning juggernauts, plucky underdogs and everything in between.

In this section, we'll shine a light on the NFL's 32 franchises. We'll provide key background info, take stock of their performances last year, outline their hopes and expectations for the season ahead and look back on a key moment from the previous year. You'll also find essential info on the key players in each team, from the coaching staff to the big names on both offense and defense. No one player is bigger than the team, but there are definitely those whose talents can decide the outcome of a play, a game and even a season.

Read on to get the lowdown on who to watch and what to expect in this year's NFL season. Whether it's seeing what went right or wrong for your team last time out, discovering the hottest rookies who are due to break out this season, or scoping out the prospects of your rivals, we've got you covered.

BUFFALO BILLS

A new stadium and head coach mark the beginning of a new era in Buffalo

© Getty Images

Another year, another 'what could have been' season for the Bills. The 2025 campaign in Buffalo was a familiar story of regular season dominance followed by playoff heartbreak, but with several of Buffalo's AFC rivals – notably the Chiefs and Ravens – missing the postseason entirely, and the rejuvenated New England Patriots making the Super Bowl once more, the team's inability to reach the big game yet again was especially devastating.

Ultimately, that failure cost head coach Sean McDermott his job after nine seasons, with offensive coordinator Joe Brady stepping up into the hot seat. Brady inherits a roster with some notable deficiencies, particularly in the receiving corps and D-line, but with the significant advantage of perhaps the best player in the league under center.

This is Josh Allen's team, and if the Bills are to finally end decades of hurt then they'll need to give their superstar quarterback all the help they can. Time is of the essence, too. Allen has led Buffalo to the postseason in seven straight seasons and is at the peak of his powers, physically, but championship windows don't last forever and with every playoff loss the pressure on him – and the team as a whole – grows.

Perhaps a change of scene will provide the lift the team needs. The Bills will play 2026 at their new, state-of-the-art stadium in Orchard Park, a facility that promises to offer one of the most raucous, hostile atmospheres in the league courtesy of the Bills Mafia. The team will need all the support they can get as they look to regain the AFC East crown from the Patriots for the sixth time in seven seasons.

> "Allen has led Buffalo to the postseason in seven straight seasons and is at the peak of his powers"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **JOE BRADY**

STADIUM **HIGHMARK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS, MIAMI DOLPHINS, NEW YORK JETS**

2025 RECORD **12-5**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.528**

★ ★ **HONOURS** ★ ★

DIVISION
1964, 1965, 1966, 1980, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2020, 2021,2022, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
1990, 1991, 1992, 1993

LEAGUE
1964, 1965

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JOSH ALLEN**

DOB: **21 MAY 1996** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **17**

They call Josh Allen 'Superman' for a reason. The league's most devastating offensive player may not quite have matched the MVP-level standards of 2024 in his most recent campaign, but he was again Buffalo's hero, its talisman and often its one-man wrecking crew. Allen's combination of speed, size and arm strength make him a dual threat quite unlike any other QB in the NFL, but just because he can do it all doesn't mean that he should have to. A lack of talent and depth at wide receiver has undoubtedly hurt Allen – and the Bills – over the past couple of seasons, and the career-high 40 sacks he took in 2025 is another concern. But despite these drawbacks, Bills fans will still hold out plenty of hope. With Allen, there's always a chance.

KEY PERSONNEL

JAMES COOK
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Cook successfully held out for a four-year, $48 million contract extension in 2025 and he began to repay it instantly, leading the league with 1,621 yards while totalling 14 touchdowns. He would surely have had more if his quarterback wasn't so dangerous on the goal line.

JOE BRADY
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

Brady's appointment was not greeted with universal acclaim, but he will have the opportunity to do what Sean McDermott couldn't and lead the Bills to a Super Bowl in 2026. However, if he falls short, don't expect the same patience that was afforded to his predecessor.

DION DAWKINS
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

The anchor of the Bills offensive line, Dawkins was deservedly voted to his fifth consecutive Pro Bowl in 2025. A fan favourite in Buffalo, he's also been repeatedly nominated as the team's Man of the Year for his incredible work in the community. A true man of the people.

DJ MOORE
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

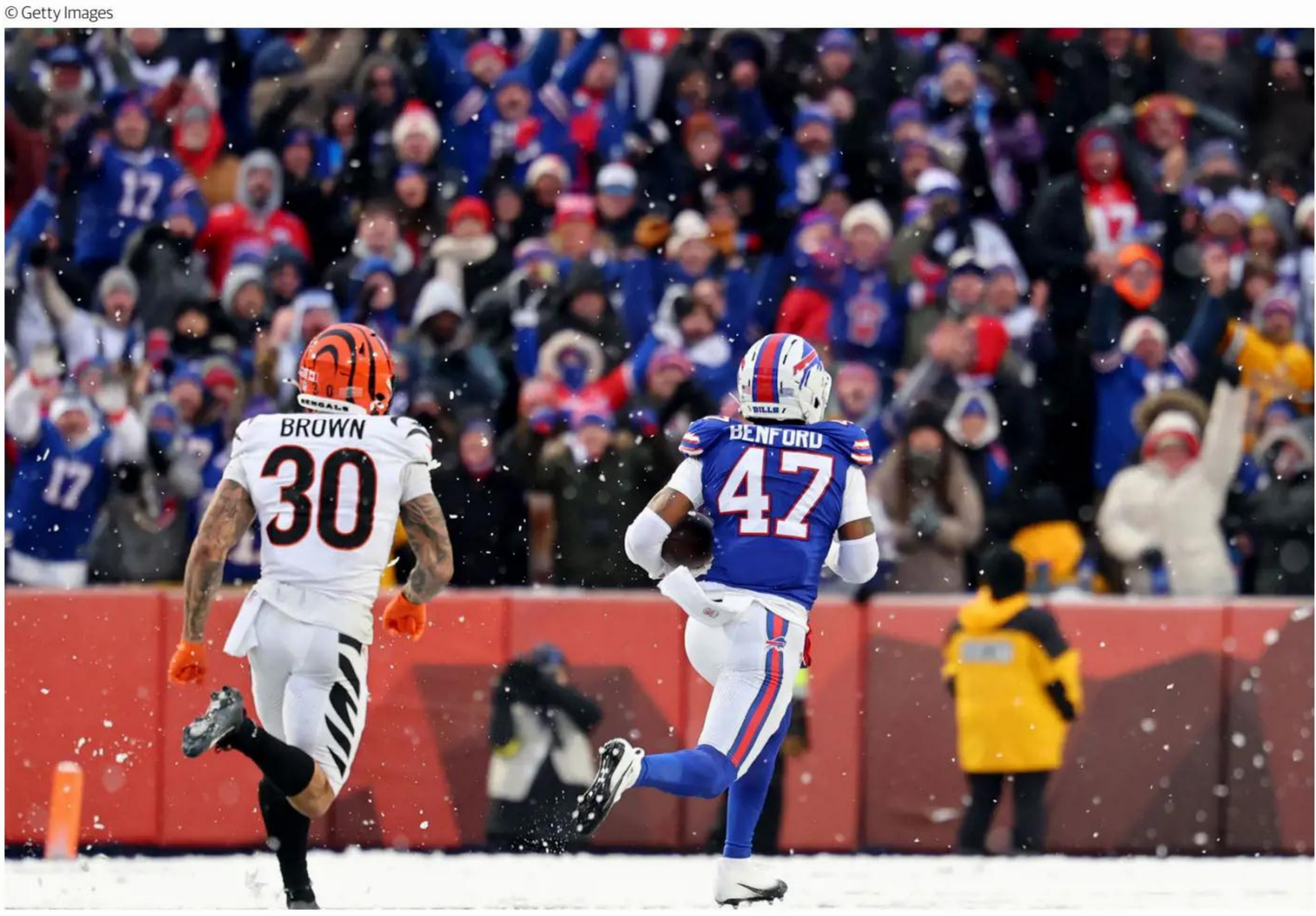
The Bills have lacked a true WR1 since the departure of Stefon Diggs in 2023 and they gave up their second round pick to bring Moore in from the Bears to fill that role. The former Panther isn't a game-breaker, but he immediately steps in as Josh Allen's top target.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Sometimes a game has everything. Two of the league's superstar quarterbacks duelling it out? Check. Snowy conditions causing havoc? Check. A 34-point fourth quarter with a dramatic, late lead change? You'd better believe it. Buffalo's Week 14 win over Cincinnati was a contender for game of the season, as the Bills weathered storms figurative and literal to deliver a crucial win and improve to 9-4 on the season. The Joe Burrow-led Bengals roared out of the blocks to lead 21-11 at the half as the Bills struggled with red zone fumbles, and held that lead into the fourth quarter until a stunning, four-and-a-half minute series that saw Allen break off a 40-yard touchdown run followed by two huge Burrow interceptions – his first of the season. Christian Benford took the first pick to the house for 63 yards, and AJ Epenesa secured the second, allowing Allen to connect with Jackson Hawes for his fourth total score. A late Bengals TD kept it close, but the Bills held out for a memorable win – and Allen's first victory over Burrow.

© Getty Images



© Getty Images

MIAMI DOLPHINS

It's all change in Miami as the Dolphins go back to the drawing board

The 2026 Miami Dolphins have a distinctly new look about them, as the team opted to push the reset button following four years under head coach Mike McDaniel. After a pair of promising seasons and consecutive trips to the playoffs, the Dolphins' last two campaigns ended in disappointment, with only a late-season rally preventing 2025 from devolving into a complete disaster.

With some major contract decisions looming, a daunting schedule on the horizon and, between the resurgent Patriots and formidable Bills, the AFC East more competitive than ever, the team is wisely looking to rebuild. Jon-Eric Sullivan, a longtime Green Bay front office member, is in as general manager and alongside him comes former Packers OC Jeff Hafley, replacing the outgoing McDaniel as head coach.

Following McDaniel out of the building were quarterback Tua Tagovailoa and star receivers Tyreek Hill and Jaylen Waddle, leaving another former Packer, QB Malik Willis, to lead the 'Phins offense into the new season. It's one of the more substantial exoduses in recent NFL history, and while there's an understanding among fans that this is a team that needed a fresh start, that's unlikely to provide too much comfort during what could be a particularly brutal season.

Hope springs eternal, however, and Miami is at least loading up on young talent with a view to future success. The team had no fewer than 13 picks in 2026 NFL Draft, which should inject some much-needed vigour into the roster. Those additions, plus the prospect of another top pick in the stacked 2027 draft class, can at least offer some reasons for optimism down the road.

> "Hope springs eternal, however, and Miami is at least loading up on young talent with a view to future success"

ESTABLISHED **1965**

HEAD COACH **JEFF HAFLEY**

STADIUM **HARD ROCK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **BUFFALO BILLS, NEW YORK JETS, NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS, TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS**

2025 RECORD **7-10**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.542**

★ ★ **HONOURS** ★ ★

DIVISION

1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2008

CONFERENCE

1971, 1972, 1973, 1982, 1984

LEAGUE

1972, 1973

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **DE'VON ACHANE**

DOB: **13 OCTOBER 2001** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **28**

While Miami opted to move on from almost all its starting skill position players ahead of the 2026 season, the Dolphins wisely chose to invest in De'Von Achane. The fourth-year running back has firmly established himself as one of the elite offensive weapons in the league, a status that the team duly recognised when signing him to a huge four-year, $64 million contract in the offseason. That figure makes Achane the third-highest-paid RB in the NFL, but few would argue he isn't worth it. His combination of blazing speed, safe hands and top-tier elusiveness are almost unmatched, and while there were early concerns over his size and durability, an injury-free season of 300-plus touches in 2025 put any lingering doubts as to his value to rest.

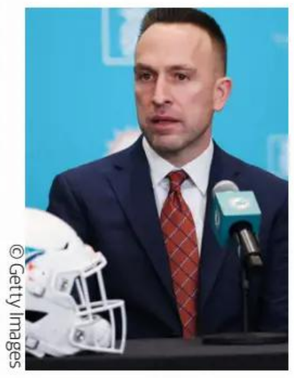
KEY PERSONNEL

JORDYN BROOKS
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

A rare bright spot in the Dolphins' 2025 season, Brooks led the NFL with a phenomenal 183 combined tackles, just one shy of his career best and earning him a deserved First-team All-Pro selection. Heading into a contract year, expect another elite season of production from the ILB.

JEFF HAFLEY
HEAD COACH


© Getty Images

Hafley's nomadic career to date has spanned college and professional football, with notable recent stints at Boston College and the Green Bay Packers. A defensive coach by trade, his appointment marks a shift from the offense-first approach under McDaniel, but whether he can steady the Dolphins' porous defense remains to be seen.

AARON BREWER
CENTER

© Getty Images

Brewer's rise from undrafted rookie to All-Pro selection has been meteoric, and another superb season in 2025 cemented his position as one of the premier offensive linemen in the NFL. A lynchpin of the Dolphins O-line, the former Bobcat ranked as the top run-blocking center in the league last year.

MALIK WILLIS
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Willis enters 2026 as a starting quarterback for the first time in his NFL career. After struggling in Tennessee but showing considerable promise in his limited gametime in Green Bay, the Dolphins will hope they've signed a rough diamond to lead their new-look offense – at least for this year.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

With a miserable record of 2-7 and facing a Bills team with legitimate Super Bowl aspirations, nobody gave the Dolphins any real hope heading into their Week 10 divisional match-up at Hard Rock Stadium in early November. But this ended up being something of a turning point in Miami's season. After unanswered touchdowns in the first two quarters, the 'Phins successfully shut out Josh Allen and co through three quarters, before Buffalo clawed back a score in the final quarter to make it a two-score game. Step forward De'Von Achane. Miami's electric RB put his prodigious speed on full display, breaking off two scintillating touchdown runs of 59 and 35 yards to cement an uncharacteristically dominant Dolphins win and leave the Bills defense chasing shadows. The victory was overdue – Miami had entered the matchup on a seven-game losing streak to their AFC East rivals, and this marked their first win over the Bills since 2022. Three further consecutive victories would follow to reignite hopes of a playoff push, however it was not to be.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

After a stint in the wilderness, are the Patriots on the brink of a new dynasty?

While it might not have felt like it as the green and blue ticker tape rained down in the aftermath of the Patriots' Super Bowl LX defeat to the Seahawks, the 2025 season was one of the most remarkable in the history of the franchise. Fans had reason for cautious optimism heading into the campaign, with former Coach of the Year Mike Vrabel taking the reins and second-year quarterback Drake Maye looking to improve on a rookie season that showed flickers of promise. But even the most confident among them surely wouldn't have predicted an AFC Championship and a tilt at the Super Bowl.

Yet that's exactly what the Patriots achieved, winning their first AFC East title since 2019 and notching 14 regular season wins for the first time in a decade. Comparisons with the Bill Belichick and Tom Brady-led dynasty might be premature, but in Vrabel and Maye there is a sense that the franchise has the building blocks to win another championship.

It won't be easy, however. As excellent as the Pats were in 2025, they benefitted from several major AFC contenders having down years. None of Patrick Mahomes, Lamar Jackson or Joe Burrow made the postseason, and while New England successfully dispatched the Chargers and Texans en route to the AFC Championship, their grindy victory against the Broncos to reach the Super Bowl came against backup QB Jarrett Stidham after Bo Nix's season-ending injury.

With the new-look Bills hungry to regain their divisional title, the Patriots will face stiffer competition in 2026. But Vrabel and Maye have proven that you'd be foolish to bet against them.

> "In Vrabel and Maye there is a sense that the franchise has the building blocks to win another championship"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **MIKE VRABEL**

STADIUM **GILLETTE STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **BUFFALO BILLS, NEW YORK JETS, MIAMI DOLPHINS, INDIANAPOLIS COLTS**

2025 RECORD **14-3**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.531**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1963, 1978, 1986, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2025

CONFERENCE

1985, 1996, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2025

LEAGUE

2001, 2003, 2004, 2014, 2016, 2018

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **DRAKE MAYE**

DOB: **30 AUGUST 2002** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **10**

★ **Fans and analysts talk about players making 'The Leap': the moment when rookies with potential go from raw talents to bona fide superstars. In 2025, Drake Maye made The Leap.** After a debut NFL season that showed promise but was ultimately hampered by lacklustre coaching, the arrival of Mike Vrabel turbocharged Maye's development. In his first full season as a starter, the former UNC QB threw for 31 touchdowns and just eight interceptions, leading the league with an astonishing 113.5 passer rating. Maye formed a strong connection with veteran WR Stefon Diggs, but he happily spread his passes across the receiving corps and also demonstrated an ability to use his legs when needed, topping 600 yards rushing across the regular and postseason.

KEY PERSONNEL

MIKE VRABEL
HEAD COACH

Public Domain, Wikipedia

A Pats legend and Super Bowl winner as a player, Vrabel's return as head coach in 2025 could scarcely have gone better. His personal life has made headlines during the offseason, but there's little doubt that the reigning NFL Coach of the Year is one of the league's best.

CHRISTIAN GONZALEZ
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

After missing the opening stretch of the 2025 season through injury, Gonzalez bounced back with his best campaign to date. The rangy CB deservedly earned a first Pro Bowl selection and was a standout performer in Super Bowl LX, despite ending up on the losing side.

TREVEYON HENDERSON
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Henderson started only four games in his debut season, working in tandem with fellow RB Rhamondre Stevenson as a devastating 'thunder and lightning' duo. But the shifty runner showed more than enough to earn a bigger role in his second year, notching an impressive ten touchdowns.

AJ BROWN
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

One of the blockbuster trades of the offseason, Brown arrives after four seasons in Philadelphia where he garnered three Second-Team All-Pro selections, two Super Bowl appearances and a Super Bowl LIX ring. A formidable presence, he immediately steps in as the Pats' No. 1 receiving option.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

It may not have been a great spectacle for the neutrals, but that won't have bothered Patriots fans one bit. The AFC Championship Game brought together the conference's two top seeds with a place in the Super Bowl on the line, and in freezing conditions at the Broncos' Mile High stadium the Pats did just enough to win. The odds were in their favour, admittedly. Despite having home advantage, Denver had lost quarterback Bo Nix to a devastating injury in its Divisional Round victory over Buffalo. Jarrett Stidham, without a pass to his name the entire season, stepped up to start and duly struggled to break down an incredibly tough Patriots defense. Maye ran in a second-quarter touchdown to tie the game 7-7 at half-time, with an Andres Borregales field goal giving New England a slender lead heading into the final period. With snow beginning to fall, Christian Gonzalez made the crucial play, intercepting Stidham before Maye closed things out with a clutch third-down conversion to send the Patriots to their first Super Bowl in eight years.

© Getty Images

NEW YORK JETS

'Rip it up and start again' is once more the mantra of the Jets

© Getty Images

The first year of the Aaron Glenn era was less than impressive. A gamble on quarterback Justin Fields backfired and the team crumbled, unable to offer much on either side of the ball. The trading away of two good players on defense (Sauce Gardner and Quinnen Williams) signalled that the team was entering yet another rebuild, but they remain as far away as ever from securing a franchise quarterback – they had the second pick in a draft that featured only one exciting QB prospect.

The Jets look like they are marching in place again this year, waiting for the 2027 draft (when there is potentially a solid crop of capable quarterbacks) before they make any kind of move towards respectability.

Almost the entire coaching staff except Glenn was replaced in the offseason, which means that Glenn himself is already on the hot seat to some extent. Recognising this, he is taking a tighter grip on the reins of the defense this year. He will be calling the plays and the team has added a lot of talent on that side of the ball – the six biggest free-agency deals handed out by the Jets all went on defensive players.

Joseph Ossai and Kingsley Enagbare come in at the edge (along with first-round draft pick David Bailey), while the aging but still effective Demario Davis returns for a third spell with the team.

Offensively, the Jets will see if Geno Smith (another prodigal son returning) has anything left in the tank, but will mostly try to dominate with a ground game built on the speedy Breece Hall and the sledgehammer that is Braelon Allen – it's an old-fashioned approach but they have little option.

> **"The Jets look like they are marching in place again this year, waiting for the 2027 draft"**

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **AARON GLENN**

STADIUM **METLIFE STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **NEW YORK GIANTS, BUFFALO BILLS, MIAMI DOLPHINS, NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS**

2025 RECORD **3-14**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.517**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1968, 1969, 1998, 2002

LEAGUE

1968

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER GARRETT WILSON

DOB: **22 JULY 2000** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **5**

The Jets are almost bereft of real star quality, especially after trading away their two best defensive players midway through the 2025 season, but Wilson fits the bill as a receiver that opposition defenses have to plan for. His 2025 season was cut in half by injury and he failed to crack the thousand-yard barrier for the first time in his career, but when healthy he has superb hands and nifty moves to get open.

He has not yet shown he is the sort of No. 1 receiver that can take over a game, but the procession of quarterbacks he has had to work with has been dismal. His best years are still ahead of him, but if the Jets don't find a competent long-term answer at quarterback soon, they will be guilty of wasting a special talent.

KEY PERSONNEL

MASON TAYLOR
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Taylor had a solid rookie campaign, flashing big-time ability in a wildly inconsistent offense. He led the team with an underwhelming 44 catches, 23 of which were good for first downs. With steady quarterback play he could become a mainstay of the passing game – whether he will get it any time soon is the big question.

ARMAND MEMBOU
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Following the drafting of left tackle Olu Fashanu in 2024, Membou came in to man the other tackle spot last year, giving the Jets a solid pair of young bookends on the offensive line. Membou was very impressive in his rookie season, starting all 17 games and earning All-Rookie honours.

BREECE HALL
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

There was much speculation that Hall might depart this past offseason, but he eventually signed a three-year, $45.75 million deal. That is a lot of money for a running back who has been good but not spectacular after suffering a knee injury during his rookie season, but the Jets are desperate for playmakers.

DAVID BAILEY
EDGE

© Getty Images

The Jets had their pick of the top defensive talent in the draft and opted for Bailey with the second overall pick. He is expected to add an intimidating presence to a toothless defense. He's fast, strong and collared opposing quarterbacks 14.5 times last season. A repeat of that would have the Jets ecstatic.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

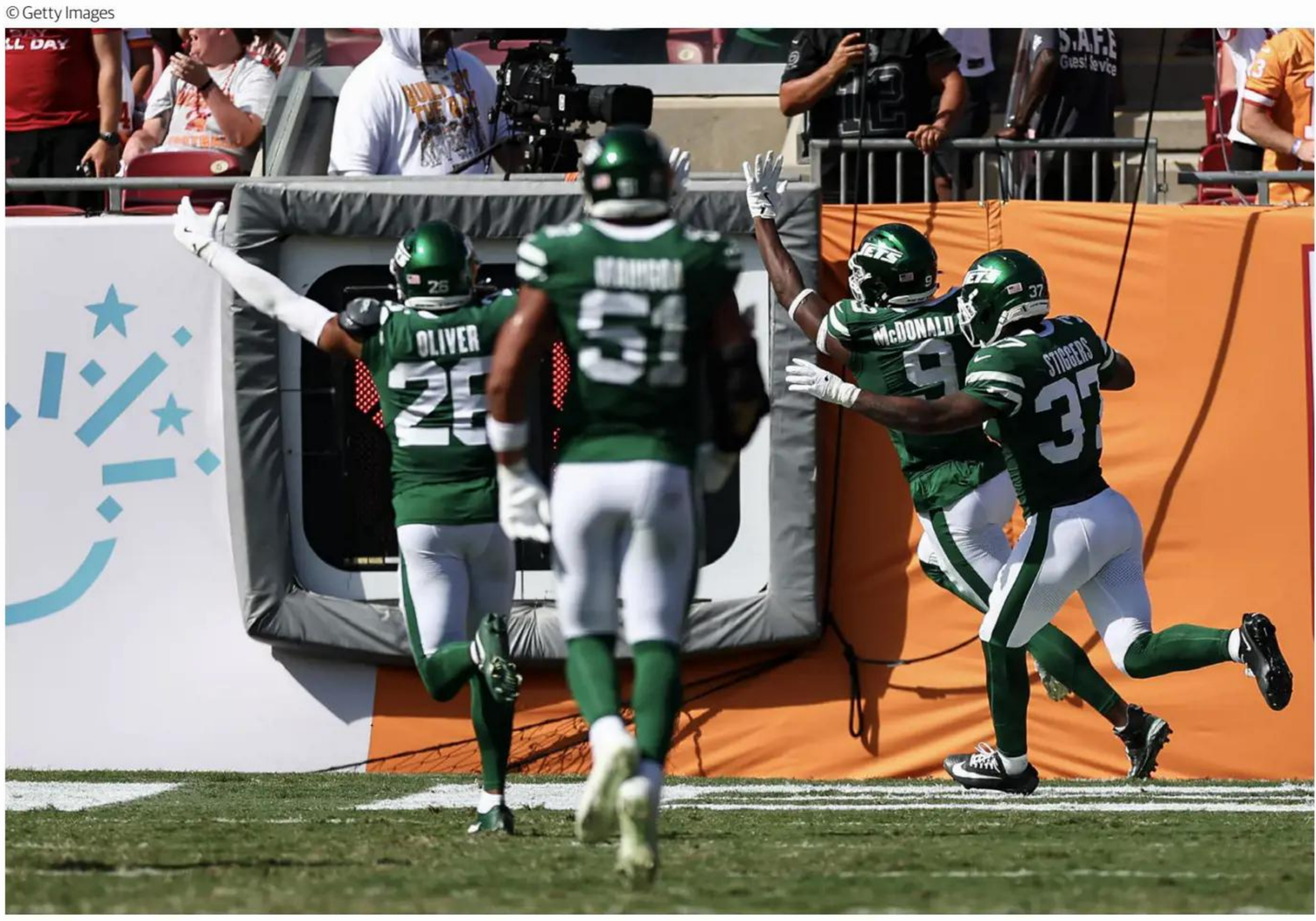
The Jets didn't win a game until they were already out of playoff contention, but that woeful 0-7 start did have some bright spots. They came close to winning a couple of games, and their week three encounter with Tampa Bay almost turned into one of the franchise's great comebacks.

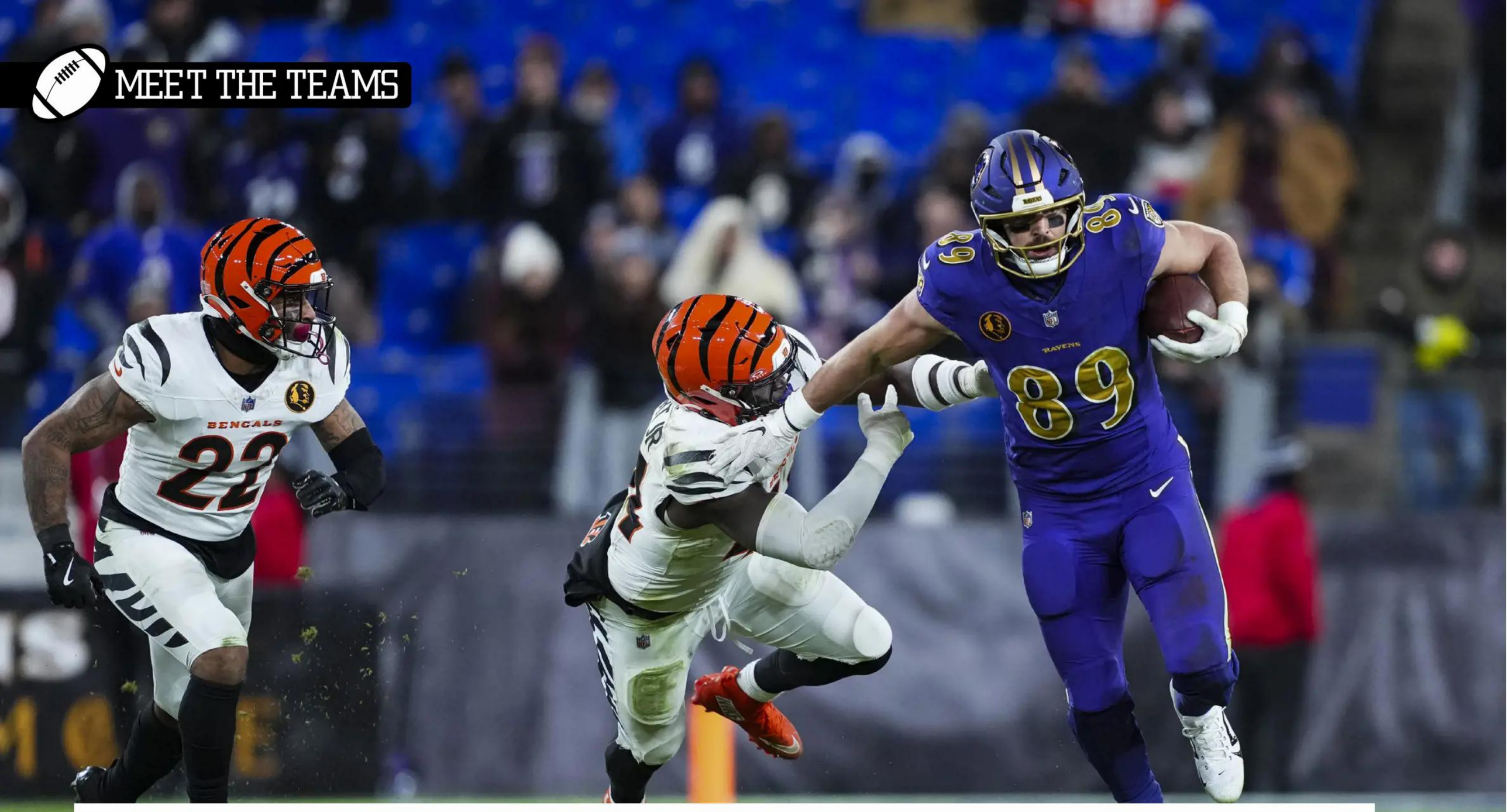
Trailing 23-6 going into the final quarter, they burst into life, with Garrett Wilson catching an 11-yard touchdown pass and Allen Lazard following up with a four-yarder.

With less than two minutes left on the clock, however, their rally appeared to be over as the Buccaneers set up for a field goal that would push their lead to nine points. Will McDonald had other ideas, bursting through the line to block the kick and then returning it for a touchdown to give the Jets a shocking one-point lead.

Needing to hold together for just a few more plays, the defense then caved, allowing Baker Mayfield to complete two big passes to set up another field goal attempt. This time, Chase McLaughlin delivered, and the Jets were 0-3.

© Getty Images





© Getty Images

BALTIMORE RAVENS

A new era dawns in Baltimore as John Harbaugh departs

Did the Ravens just experience the most disappointing season in the franchise's history? It sounds outlandish, but some commentators are saying just that, given how high expectations were going into 2025. Instead of making progress, the team fell back to earth with an almighty bump, failing to make the playoffs despite having a division title within their grasp in the last moments of their last regular season game.

There was player regression all over the team, most notably from quarterback Lamar Jackson and cornerback Marlon Humphrey, and head coach John Harbaugh paid the ultimate price for his team's inability to get over the hump. The Ravens made the playoffs six times in the last eight seasons, but eventually a team has to reach the Super Bowl or the head coach is going to go.

Jesse Minter steps in, with a reputation as a defensive mastermind that meshes well with the Ravens' identity. He's worked with the Ravens before and now returns to fix an ailing team. An effort to rejuvenate the defense saw a major trade swung for the Raider's Maxx Crosby, only for it to fall though when Crosby failed a medical. The Ravens had planned to bring in both Crosby and Trey Hendrickson, to form a terrifying pass-rush combination, but in the end they had to settle for just adding Hendrickson.

They lost a major talent in free agency, with one of the game's best centers, Tyler Linderbaum, departing, and they went into the draft with big needs on the offensive line despite the signing of John Simpson at guard. Olaivavega Ioane was the perfect draft pick – he's a bruiser who is expected to start and perform immediately at one of the guard slots.

> "Jesse Minter has worked with the Ravens before and now returns to fix an ailing team"

ESTABLISHED **1996**

HEAD COACH
JESSE MINTER

STADIUM **M&T BANK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS
PITTSBURGH STEELERS

2025 RECORD **8-9**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.479**

★ ★ **HONOURS** ★ ★

DIVISION
2003, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2018, 2019, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
2000, 2012

LEAGUE
2000, 2012

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **LAMAR JACKSON**

DOB: **7 JANUARY 1997** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **8**

★ **It was a brutal year for Jackson, but the Ravens need him to bounce back because they are a different team when he is at his peak.** He turned in the worst rushing figures of his career in 2025, managing just 349 yards, and his 2,549 passing yards were his least since the 2022 season.

Injuries always have and always will be part of Jackson's story because of the way he plays the game, but the drafting of Olaivavega Ioane shows that the team understands he needs to be protected better – Ioane gave up two sacks in 2,231 snaps as a college player. With John Simpson manning the other guard spot and two promising receivers added during the draft, better protection and more weapons could see Jackson back to his best.

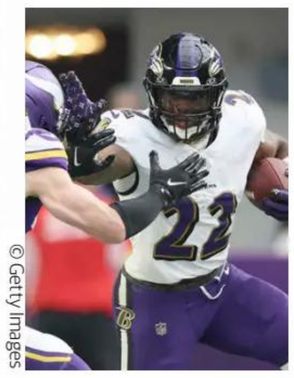
KEY PERSONNEL

JESSE MINTER
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

Minter spent four years with the Ravens from 2017 to 2020, first as a defensive assistant and then as defensive backs coach. After stints as a defensive coordinator in college (Michigan) and the pros (LA Chargers), he has earned his first shot at a head coaching job.

DERRICK HENRY
RUNNING BACK


© Getty Images

Henry started to show his age last year... and then shook off the years to pile up an impressive 570 yards and six touchdowns in the last four games of the season. Baltimore would love him to hold together for one more season as they transition to a new coaching regime.

ZAY FLOWERS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Flowers continues to improve and is establishing himself as a bona fide No. 1 receiver. He made the Pro Bowl for the second time after an 86-catch season and is the only Raven receiver ever to earn that accolade. It will cost a lot of money to retain his services after this season.

OLAIVAVEGA IOANE
GUARD

© Getty Images

Baltimore kept their first-round draft pick when the trade for Maxx Crosby fell through, and they may turn out to be very pleased about that – Ioane is an absolute mauler of a guard who could set the tone on the Ravens offensive line for the next decade.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Can a bye week be considered the highlight of a season?
Maybe it can if it completely turns a team around. The Ravens were a Super Bowl contender in the eyes of many as the campaign opened, but a sputtering start saw them fall into a 1-5 hole before the bye week, on the verge of becoming irrelevant before Halloween.

The bye gave the Ravens a chance to reset and regroup. John Harbaugh spoke about "working through every aspect and issue that we can", and clearly whatever they did, it worked. The team was blessed with a less-than-stellar line-up of opponents when their season resumed, but wins against the Bears, Dolphins, Vikings, Browns and Jets saw them shoot back into contention, improving their record to 6-5 and making the playoffs look attainable once more.

The turnaround was due in part to turnovers. Prior to the bye, the Ravens gave the ball up 10 times and forced just three turnovers of their own. In the five-game win-streak after the bye they forced 10 turnovers and coughed up the ball just three times.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

CINCINNATI BENGALS

Will Joe Burrow stay healthy this year? The Bengals' season depends on it

Fans might have expected coach Zac Taylor to be on the hot seat after missing the playoffs for three straight seasons, but the Bengals are a patient organisation and clearly believe that injury woes were the main reason for another disappointing campaign.

Losing Joe Burrow for nine games after a promising 2-0 start was a blow, but it would not be true to say that his absence was the only problem. Equally damaging was a defense that couldn't protect a lead even when the stand-in quarterbacks performed adequately. Things improved after the bye week, but the defense still finished the season ranked 30th in points allowed.

Injuries played their part here too, as the team's best pass-rusher, Trey Hendrickson, played just seven games (and in the offseason he defected to rivals Baltimore on a huge free agent contract).

Unsurprisingly, defense has been the focus of the offseason. Three free agents have been brought in, with Boye Mafe leading the way – he is not a pass-rusher of Hendrickson's calibre, but then few are. Safety Brian Cook and defensive tackle Jonathan Allen also join the unit.

The big shock of the offseason was trading away the overall No.10 pick in the draft for 28-year-old defensive tackle Dexter Lawrence. Lawrence is a very good player, but the trade price seemed high. When the Bengals finally made a selection, in the second round, they opted for yet more defensive help – Cashius Howell is a speedy edge rusher with short arms. It should all add up to a considerably improved defense, and if Burrow can stay healthy to run the offense, that might be enough to put the Bengals back in the playoff hunt.

> "The big shock of the offseason was trading away the overall No.10 pick in the draft for Dexter Lawrence"

ESTABLISHED **1967**

HEAD COACH **ZAC TAYLOR**

STADIUM **PAYCOR STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS
CLEVELAND BROWNS

2025 RECORD **6-11**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.450**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1970, 1973, 1981, 1988, 1990, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2021, 2022

CONFERENCE
1981, 1988, 2021

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JOE BURROW**

DOB: **10 DECEMBER 1996** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **9**

★ **When upright, Burrow gives the Bengals a puncher's chance every week, but the game of Russian roulette continues.** Last year was the third season out of six where he missed significant chunks of playing time (six straight games as a rookie, seven in 2023, and nine last year). The worry is that one of these injuries will turn out to be more serious and the feeling among Bengals fans is that the team is frittering away the career of one of the best quarterbacks to ever play the game.

Past offseasons have seen serious efforts to improve the offensive line, but the team now seems happy with its decent-but-not-great unit. If they continue to improve, and if Burrow stays healthy, the Bengals will be a top-ten offense again.

KEY PERSONNEL

DALTON RISNER
GUARD

© Getty Images

Risner is not yet a star for the Bengals, but he's a strong pass-blocker and solidified the guard position after joining as a free agent last year. The Bengals will be keen to see if their improved offensive line can get even better with another season of cohesion under their belts.

JA'MARR CHASE
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Chase manages to excel no matter who is under center for the Bengals. He was targeted a league-high 185 times, pulling in 125 of them for 1,412 yards. Given the fact that it was Joe Flacco and Jake Browning and not Burrow throwing the passes for half the season, those numbers are almost unbelievable.

DJ TURNER
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

Along with Daxton Hill, the Bengals have one of the best young cornerback pairings in the game. In his third season, Turner broke up 18 passes, picked off two and forced two fumbles. He was also an effective tackler, registering 40 stops, including two tackles for loss.

CHASE BROWN
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Brown continues his ascent, cracking the thousand-yard barrier for the first time last year. Nothing would help Joe Burrow more than a productive ground game to keep defenses on their heels and Brown is effective even though he gets hit in the backfield on so many of his carries.

2025

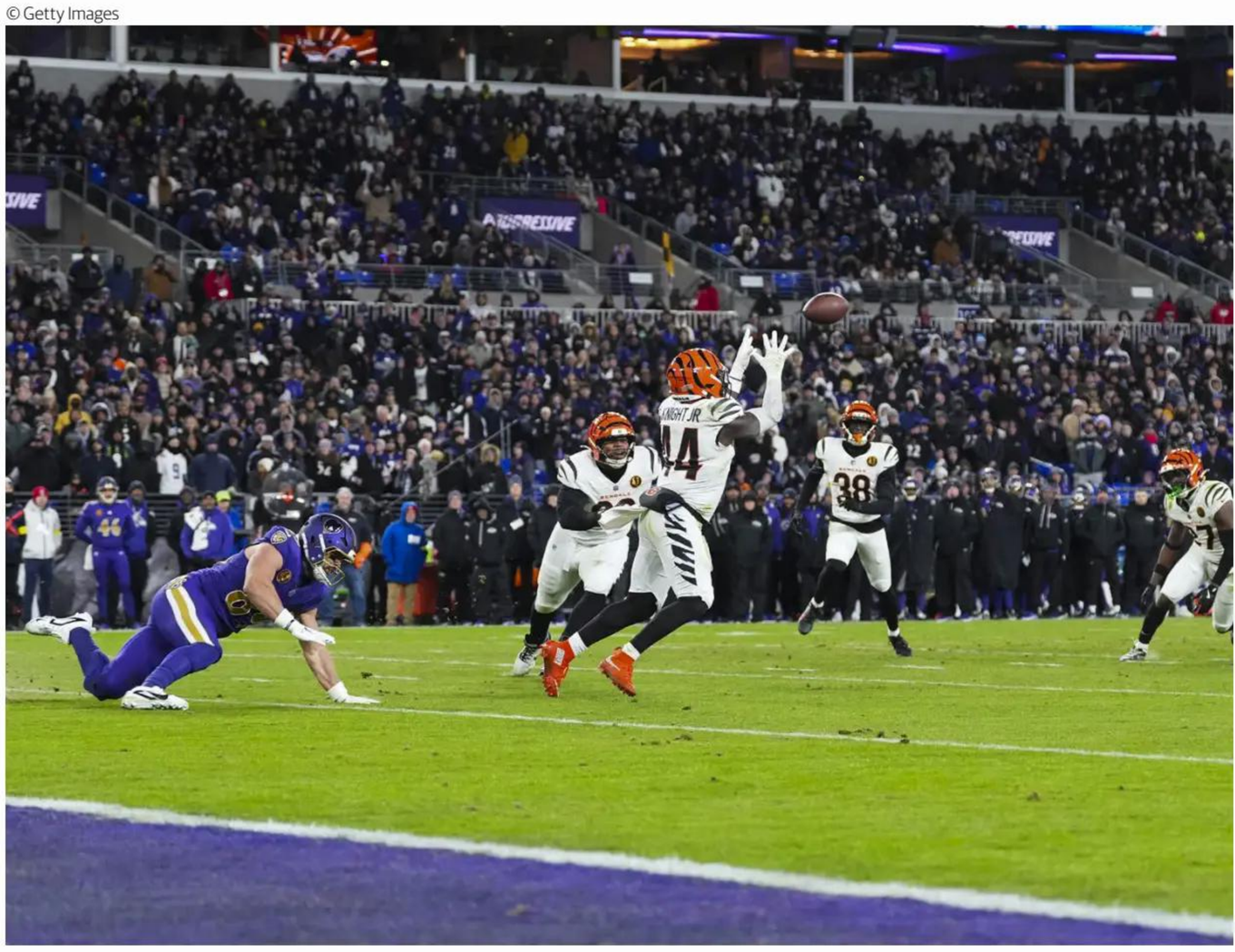
HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Many pundits didn't see any reason to rush Joe Burrow back after his toe injury, but his return in week 13 was a shot in the arm for a team that was reeling. Having fallen to 3-8 after the second four-game losing skid of the campaign, the Bengals' playoff chances were on life support when Burrow returned. He did well, passing for 261 yards and two touchdowns, but it was a gutsy performance by a much-maligned defense that paved the way to victory.

In an edgy first half, the defense forced and recovered three Ravens fumbles, including one where Isaiah Likely coughed up the ball just before crossing the goal line on what would have been a 44-yard touchdown reception. The Bengals drove for a field goal to take the lead after that turnover and added another three-pointer after the third fumble recovery of the half.

In the second half, Demetrius Knight intercepted Lamar Jackson to kill another scoring threat and a fourth fumble recovery, the defense's fifth turnover of the day, saw the Bengals get back in the win column and restore a little hope.

© Getty Images



CLEVELAND BROWNS

A rebuild on offense was eclipsed by a huge trade as the Browns continue to flounder

For the second straight year, the Browns' season was over early, as they limped to a 2-8 start behind lacklustre quarterback play. The offensive woes were especially painful considering their defense was playing at an elite level.

Nowhere was that more true than on the defensive line, where Myles Garrett played up to his huge new contract by turning in one of the greatest seasons ever from a defender. His 23 sacks set a new NFL record and he added another 33 tackles for loss.

For a while, it looked like Garrett would be staying in Cleveland. Instead, the decision was taken to trade him, and they got a king's ransom from the Rams in Jared Verse and a clutch of draft picks, including a first-rounder next year. Maybe it was inevitable that Garrett would eventually go to a contender, but he leaves a huge hole in the Browns team, not just the defense.

The move has overshadowed serious attempts to rebuild the offense. Last year the line was a mess, with no fewer than 14 combinations playing at least 10 snaps, and just about everyone from last year's line-up has gone. In are guard Zion Johnson and center Elgton Jenkins (via free agency) and tackles Spencer Fano and Austin Barber (via the draft). With two talented receivers drafted as well (KC Concepcion and Denzel Boston), this will be a radically different unit.

The quarterback position is the main issue, however, and it is unclear if the Browns have a solution in-house. Shedeur Sanders showed leadership qualities in his eight appearances and some think he has the ability to develop into a top player, but his 10 interceptions showed how raw he is.

> "The quarterback is the main issue, and it is unclear if the Browns have a solution in-house"

ESTABLISHED **1944**

HEAD COACH **TODD MONKEN**

STADIUM **HUNTINGTON BANK FIELD**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS **CINCINNATI BENGALS**

2025 RECORD **5-12**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.429**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1946, 1947, 1948, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1971, 1980, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989

CONFERENCE
1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1957, 1964, 1965, 1968, 1969

LEAGUE
1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1954, 1955, 1964

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **CARSON SCHWESINGER**

DOB: **24 FEBRUARY 2003** POS: **LINEBACKER** NO. **49**

Schwesinger enjoyed a monstrous rookie season, piling up 156 combined tackles on his way to Defensive Rookie of the Year honours. He didn't flash in bursts either, playing at a high level throughout the campaign.

To find a talent like this in the second round is a feather in the front office's cap. Schwesinger showed his pedigree in his very first appearances in a Browns uniform, registering eight tackles and a hit on the quarterback against Cincinnati. Starting in week 9 he racked up double-digit tackles in seven straight games.

With some saying he has similar traits to a young Luke Kuechly, Schwesinger is a major piece for new defensive coordinator Mike Rutenberg to work with.

KEY PERSONNEL

SHEDEUR SANDERS
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

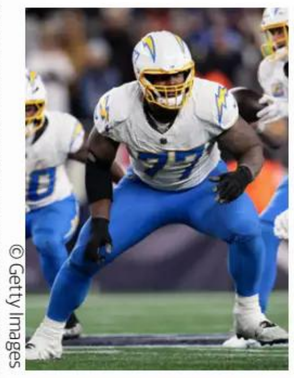
Sanders' self-confidence grates with some, but teammates appear to love his brash style, and he added a spark to the offense when finally given a chance. It was a feast-and-famine rookie year but if he can improve ball-security he has a chance to establish himself as the starter.

RONNIE HICKMAN
SAFETY

© Getty Images

Every front office dreams of finding an undrafted free agent like Hickman. In his third season he blossomed into a full-time starter and made more than 100 tackles as well as picking off two interceptions and breaking up seven more passes. His physicality sets the tone in the Browns secondary.

ZION JOHNSON
GUARD


© Getty Images

The interior offensive line may seem a strange place to start a rebuild, but the Browns' line was a mess last year and Johnson gives them a durable and dependable player to build around. He started 65 games in four seasons with the Chargers and comes in on a deal worth just under $50 million.

KC CONCEPCION
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

The second of two first-round draft picks for the Browns, Concepcion is a big-play target for whoever ends up playing quarterback. He averaged 15.1 yards per catch last season and had 25 touchdowns over his college career. One of the flashiest players in the draft, he will add some sizzle to the offense.

2025

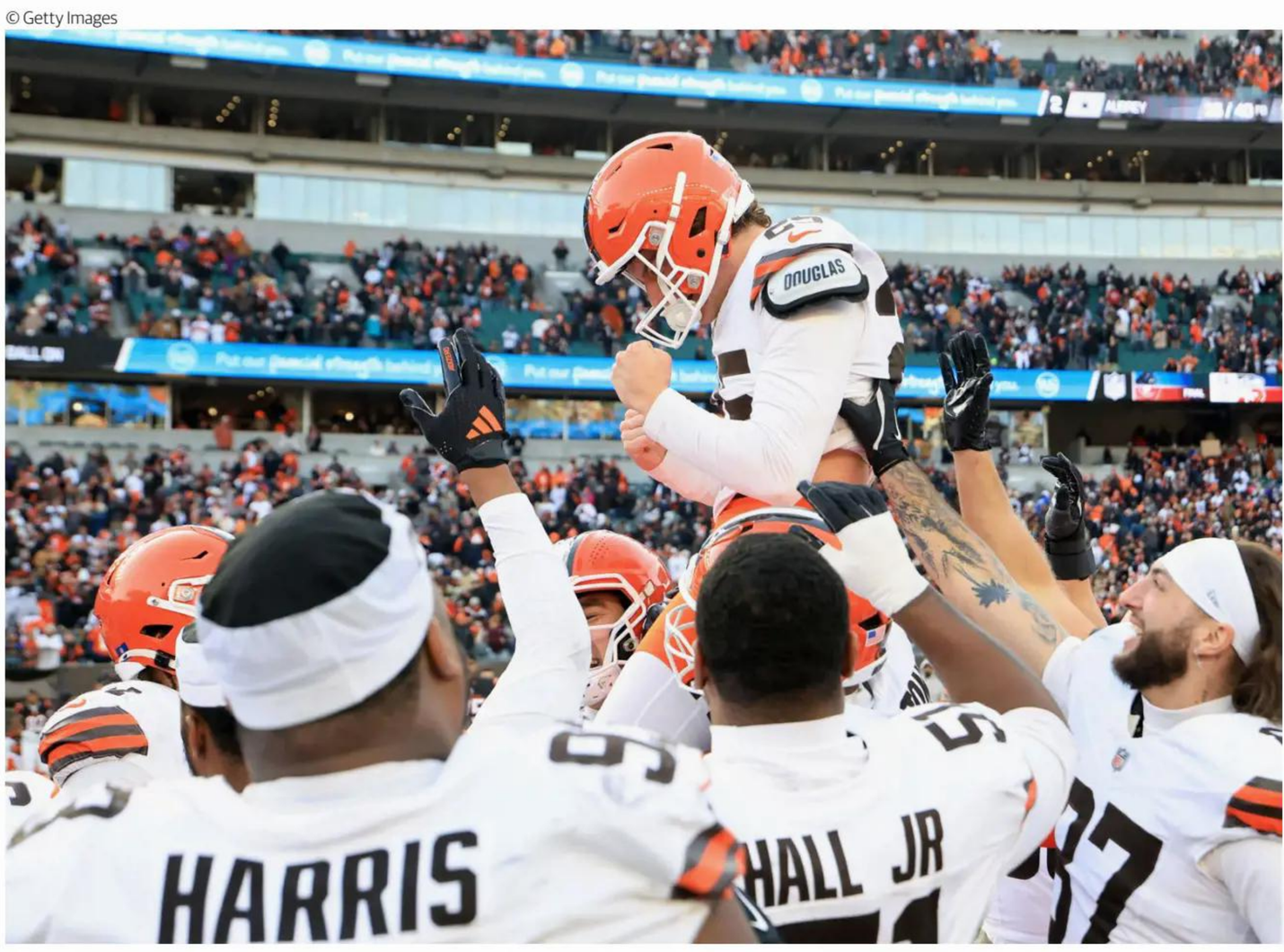
HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

There was little for Browns fans to get excited about last year, and most of the personal highlights (Myles Garrett's four- and five-sack games and Shedeur Sanders' best outing as a rookie) ended in defeat. The season did end on a relatively high note, however. Two wins, both over divisional rivals, gave at least some cause for optimism as the new year opened.

First, the Steelers were dealt with in week 17. Sanders was not prolific, but he was efficient, completing a season-best 73.9 percent of his throws for 186 yards and throwing the game's only touchdown.

The following week he was quiet (passing for just 111 yards) but he was interception-free for only the second time in his eight appearances, despite being pressured all game. He took six sacks, but the Browns strung together consecutive wins for the only time all year. Sanders' growing effectiveness when running (at least 20 yards in each of his last five games) brought a new element to the offense and Cleveland fans will be hoping he can take a big step in his sophomore campaign.

© Getty Images



© Getty Images

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Aaron Rodgers is back, but does he have enough left to keep the Steelers in contention?

Different fanbases have different ideas of what 'success' means. Many fans are envious of the Steelers' perennial status as contenders, but there were calls of 'Fire Mike Tomlin' even before this season ended with yet another defeat in the Wild Card round. Those disgruntled fans ultimately got their wish, and the Steelers are entering a new era. They will go into the 2026 season with only their fourth head coach since 1969.

The Steelers are trying a new tack – their last three coaches (Chuck Noll, Bill Cowher and Tomlin) were all defensive minds with no head-coaching experience, and all of them were in their 30s. Mike McCarthy comes from the other side of the ball and has two lengthy stints as a head coach already under his belt. He will turn 63 during the upcoming season.

McCarthy's first job was to weather the now annual 'will he, won't he' question of Aaron Rodgers, who did okay in his first season with the Steelers but also increasingly looked his age. Yes, he helped the team to a division title, but he is not the future. He remains the present, however, after finally deciding to return for a 22nd season.

With Rodgers keeping the team guessing, they resisted the urge to pull the trigger on a quarterback in free agency or the draft (although if the players on offer had been of higher quality it might have been a different story), opting instead to boost their secondary by bringing in cornerback Jamel Dean from the Buccaneers and adding depth to their offensive line with draftee Max Iheanachor, a fascinating prospect who did not start playing football until 2022.

> "McCarthy's first job was to weather the now annual 'will he, won't he' question of Aaron Rodgers"

ESTABLISHED **1933**

HEAD COACH **MIKE MCCARTHY**

STADIUM **ACRISURE STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS **BALTIMORE RAVENS**

2025 RECORD **10-7**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.495**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

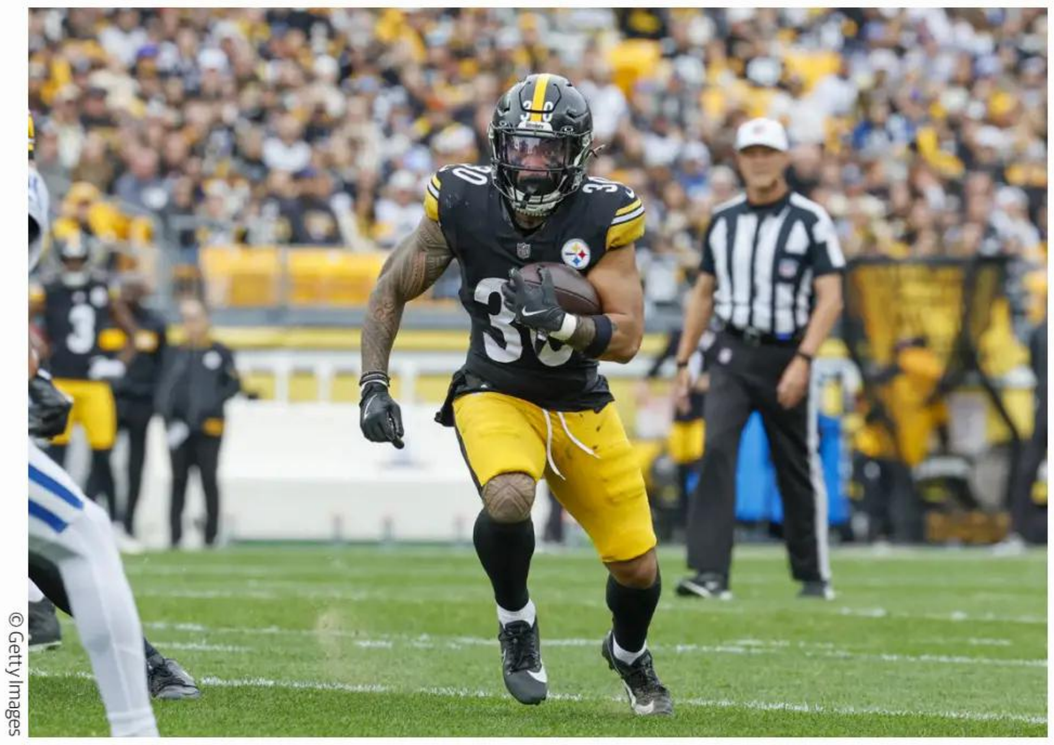
1972, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1983, 1984, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2025

CONFERENCE

1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1995, 2005, 2008, 2010

LEAGUE

1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 2005, 2008


© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JAYLEN WARREN**

DOB: **1 NOVEMBER 1998** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **30**

★ **The Steelers were delighted with the return they got from this former undrafted free agent last year.** Warren rushed for 958 yards and caught 40 of the 45 passes thrown his way. He is also highly rated as a pass-blocker and brings an explosive edge to the team. It all combined to earn him a new, two-year deal worth $11.9 million, but the team wants more production out of the backfield to compensate for the declining powers of Aaron Rodgers.

Enter Rico Dowdle, with two consecutive thousand-yard campaigns under his belt. He is also a receiving threat and his two-year $12.25 million free-agent contract is an almost exact match for Warren's new deal, demonstrating that the Steelers plan on employing a two-headed backfield this year.

KEY PERSONNEL

MIKE MCCARTHY
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

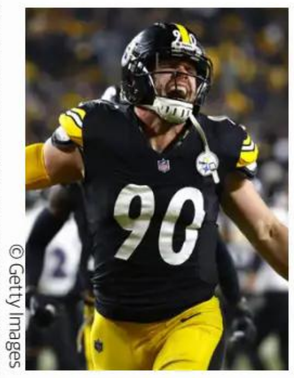
McCarthy is a local boy, having grown up in Greenfield, close to the Steelers' practice ground. As an offensive-minded coach, the team is hoping he will lift a unit that has been mired in mediocrity for the last seven seasons. His ties with Aaron Rodgers were also intriguing.

DK METCALF
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Metcalf had a quiet first season in Pittsburgh, punctuated by his suspension after an altercation with a fan. On the field he had moments of familiar dominance, but only managed to crack the hundred-yard mark twice. The team will be looking for more from their top wideout this year.

TJ WATT
OUTSIDE LINEBACKER


© Getty Images

Watt's best days might be behind him as he pushes further into his 30s, but he remains one of the NFL's most-feared defenders. He was held without a sack in eight of his 14 appearances last year, but remained an all-round threat with two interceptions, two fumble recoveries, seven sacks and 10 tackles for loss.

AARON RODGERS
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Rodgers has played at least 16 games in 13 of his NFL seasons to date, however, his yardage total with the Steelers last year (3,322) was the lowest in any of those seasons. His star is clearly setting, but he remains the best option on the Steelers roster. Is a last hurrah on the cards?

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Having ended the Steelers' 2024 season, it was only fitting that the Ravens should be the last obstacle in 2025. It had been a sputtering campaign for Pittsburgh, never stringing together more than three wins, but a push for the division title had started with a week 14 win at the Ravens and now it was all on the line. Whichever team won the week 18 rematch would clinch the AFC North title and a spot in the postseason.

It was a game of contrasting styles. Lamar Jackson completed just 11 passes for Baltimore, but they were good for 238 yards and three scores. The Ravens relied on Derrick Henry (20 carries for 126 yards) to consistently move the ball.

The Steelers, meanwhile, went the opposite route. Jaylen Warren managed just 66 rushing yards, and it was the precise short-range passes of Aaron Rodgers (31 completions for 294 yards and one score) that kept their offense ticking.

The lead changed hands four times in a thrilling fourth quarter before Tyler Loop missed the 44-yard field goal that would have given Baltimore the win and the division.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

HOUSTON TEXANS

Will the Texans stall in the divisional round again this year?

Something strange happened in the AFC South around the midway point of last season – while the 8-2 Colts lost their last seven games, the 3-5 Texans went on a 9-0 tear to end their campaign, completely flipping the team's positions. Can the Texans build on that momentum, and their third consecutive Wild Card playoff victory, or are they more like the team that struggled to that 3-5 start?

A big part of that question revolves around CJ Stroud. A good quarterback, he has not yet made the jump to great, and the time is coming when a huge extension will be required to keep him in Houston. The team has shown they believe in him, investing heavily in the offensive line to keep him healthy and allow him to reach his potential. Last year he was sacked just 23 times, although he did suffer a concussion and missed three games with injury.

In come free agent linemen Braden Smith and Wyatt Teller, with first-round draft pick Keylan Rutledge also likely to grab a starting spot – in 43 college starts he allowed just two sacks and that is the sort of protection the Texans would love to see.

An already scary defense also got a boost. Eagles safety Reed Blankenship has joined in free agency and huge defensive tackle Kayden McDonald was nabbed in the second round of the draft. He can really move for a man of his size (326 pounds) and he notched 9.5 tackles for loss and three sacks last season.

The Texans allowed just 17.4 points per game last year, the second-best mark in the league, and they may just have got a little better.

> "A good quarterback, CJ Stroud has not yet made the jump to great"

ESTABLISHED **1999**

HEAD COACH **DEMECO RYANS**

STADIUM **NRG STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **INDIANAPOLIS COLTS**

2025 RECORD **12-5**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.474**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2023, 2024

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **WILL ANDERSON JR**

DOB: **2 SEPTEMBER 2001** POS: **DEFENSIVE END** NO. **51**

★ **Anderson had a great season in his third pro campaign, finishing second in the Defensive Player of the Year voting (although admittedly a long way behind Myles Garrett) and making first-team All-Pro.**

Anderson sets the standard on the Texans defense and arguably for the entire team. His relentless effort is an inspiration to his teammates, and he was rewarded with his highest sack total last season, when he registered 12 takedowns in 17 starts (the first time he has started all 17 games). He saved his biggest performance for the biggest game the Texans played all year, earning three sacks in a valiant effort against the Patriots in the divisional round of the playoffs. He just signed a three-year, $150 million contract, making him the highest-paid non-quarterback in league history.

KEY PERSONNEL

AIREONTAE ERSERY
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Ersery did well in his rookie season, manning one of the most challenging positions in the sport. His allowed-pressure rate of just 7.9% was the tenth best mark among all left tackles and with a year's experience under his belt he should be even more effective this season.

CJ STROUD
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Stroud's numbers have gone down year-on-year (4,108, 3,727 and 3,041 passing yards, along with 23, 20 and 19 TDs). There are fears that the franchise has damaged him with inconsistent offensive lines, and this could be a pivotal season – either he snaps out of his regression, or the Texans could start looking elsewhere.

NICO COLLINS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Collins comes into his sixth season aged just 27 and is one of the most consistent receivers in the league. He has broken the thousand-yard barrier for the last three consecutive season and is one of CJ Stroud's favourite targets. He's a deep threat who averaged 15.7 yards per catch last season.

AZEEZ AL-SHAAIR
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

The Texans have been delighted with Al-Shaair since they signed him in free agency in 2024. He made the Pro Bowl for the first time last season and is considered an elite run-stopping linebacker. He was rewarded with a three-year, $54 million extension this offseason.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Aside from a string of circus catches from Nico Collins, most of the Texans' biggest plays of last year came on defense. This was true during the biggest win of the year, a 30-6 dismantling of Pittsburgh in the Wild Card round.

The Houston defense was in suffocating form, holding the Steelers to just 175 net yards of total offense and allowing them to convert just two of 14 third downs. In the fourth quarter, two defensive touchdowns sealed the win for Houston, as Aaron Rodgers looked his age. First, with Houston holding a 10-point lead, Rodgers was sacked by Will Anderson and Sheldon Rankins on third-and-12. Rodgers fumbled the ball and Rankins picked it up before rumbling 33 yards for a score.

After Woody Marks added a 13-yard touchdown, the Steelers were in desperation mode, but all they found was more trouble. Attempting to find Pat Freiermuth on fourth down, Rodgers' underthrown pass was intercepted by Calen Bullock and returned 50 yards for a pick-six.

For the third year in a row, the Texans had won in the Wild Card round to reach the divisional round of the playoffs.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

The Colts will hope to recover from a Jekyll and Hyde season

The bye week can be an opportunity for a team to reset and recover, but for the Colts last season, all they saw was regression. An imposing 8-2 before the bye, they totally collapsed after it, going 0-7 to leave head coach Shane Steichen firmly on the hot seat. Losing Daniel Jones for the last few weeks of the season was part of the problem, but the slide had already started – the Colts had lost three in a row before Jones tore his Achilles tendon, partly because he was already playing through a broken fibula.

Recovery time for an Achilles tear has dramatically reduced in recent years, and the Colts are hopeful that Jones will be ready to lead them into the new campaign. He'd better be ready, because Anthony Richardson is not an option. It is shocking how quickly the overall No.4 pick in the 2023 draft has flamed out, but he is widely expected to request a trade soon.

Offense is the Colts' strength, and they made a bold move to keep it that way in the offseason, signing Alec Pierce to a monster contract even though he barely cracked 1,000 yards receiving last year.

Defense is a different story. Another bold move saw cornerback Sauce Gardner join the team when the Colts gave up two first-round draft picks for the former Jet. It was coincidental that the Colts went 1-7 with Gardner in the line-up, and the main issue on the unit may be the lack of a dominating pass rusher. There are hopes that Laiatu Latu will continue his steady progress and linebacker CJ Allen was widely considered to be a steal in the second round of the draft.

> "The main issue on the defense may be the lack of a dominating pass rusher"

ESTABLISHED **1953**

HEAD COACH **SHANE STEICHEN**

STADIUM **LUCAS OIL STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **HOUSTON TEXANS**

2025 RECORD **8-9**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.465**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1968, 1970, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1987, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014

CONFERENCE

1958, 1959, 1964, 1968, 1970, 2006, 2009

LEAGUE

1958, 1959, 1968, 1970, 2006

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **ALEC PIERCE**

DOB: **2 MAY 2000** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **14**

Pierce has been a good receiver in his first four seasons, but a total of 2,934 yards over those four campaigns is not eye-popping. Still, the Colts handed him a four-year, $114 million contract in the offseason and clearly believe he is still improving.

Pierce's greatest attribute is as a deep threat, coupled with excellent size (6'3" and 211 pounds). He only caught 47 passes last year but averaged 21.3 yards per reception – and he wasn't turning short connections into big gains after the catch, he is a genuine burner who can take the top off a defense. For two seasons in a row he has led the league in average per catch and there was strong interest from other teams in prying him away from the Colts.

KEY PERSONNEL

DANIEL JONES
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Jones resurrected his flagging career in Indianapolis last year, but the injury bug followed him from the Giants – he has suffered 12 injuries over his seven-year career. If he can stay healthy (assuming he fully recovers from his Achilles tear) the Colts offense looks to be in good hands.

JONATHAN TAYLOR
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Taylor was a workhorse for the Colts last season, leading the league with 323 carries and 18 touchdowns on the ground (he added two more on receptions). He was lethal early in the season but slowed down during the losing streak, and the team must guard against overworking him this year.

LAIATU LATU
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Latu was the first defensive player drafted in 2024, but he has not yet lit up the league. There are signs that he is steadily improving (he had 8.5 sacks last year following just four as a rookie) after starting 16 games. Many believe he is poised to break out this year.

CJ ALLEN
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Many draft pundits had Allen tabbed as a first-round talent and he is expected to start following the departure of Zaire Franklin. He's a three-down player, able to defend the run, cover backs and rush the passer, and at 6'1" and 235 pounds (with sub-4.5 speed) he fits the profile for modern NFL linebackers.

2025

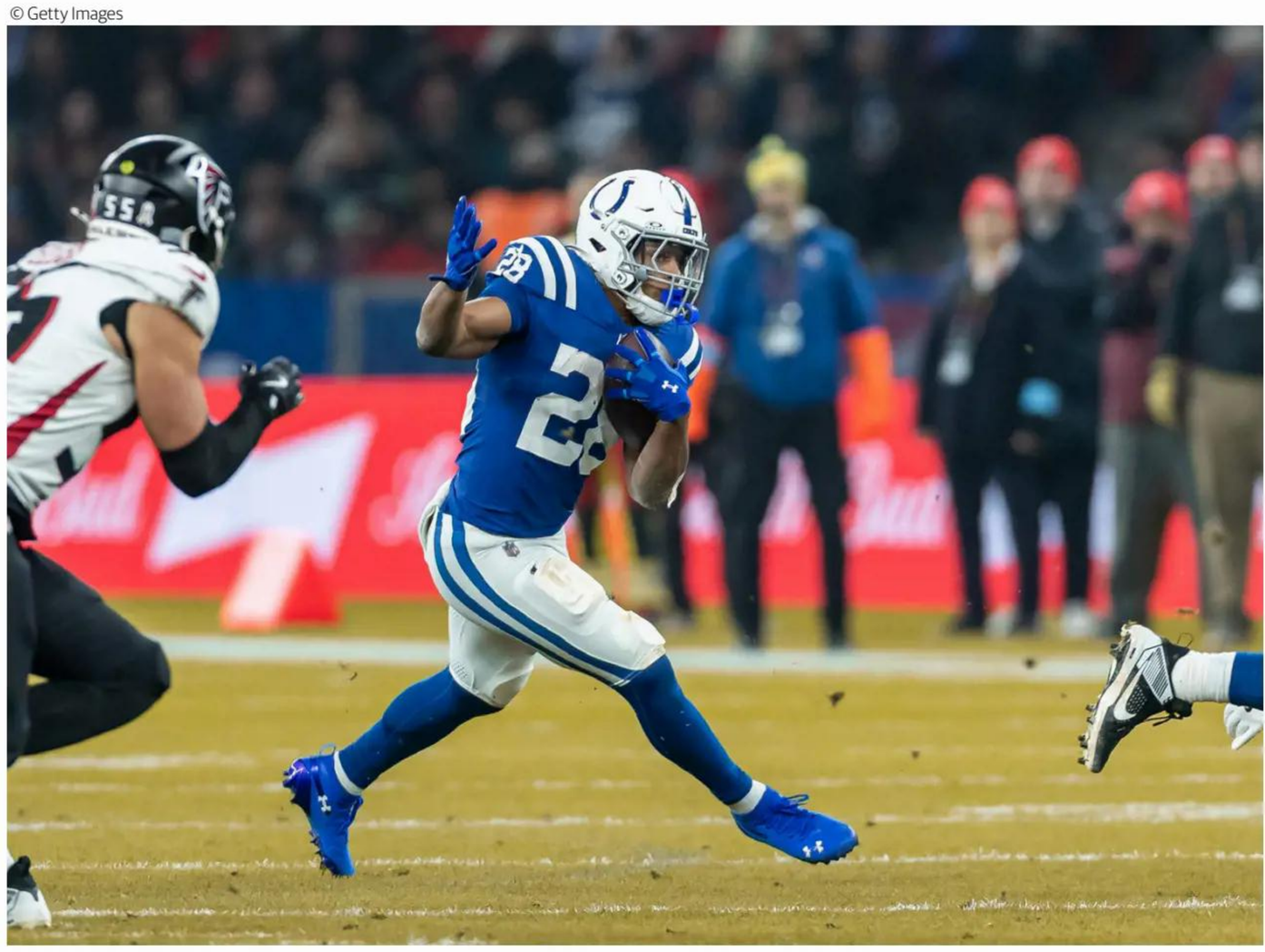
HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The last win of the Colts' season was a barnstormer, an overtime thriller against the Falcons in Berlin, in which all of their offensive weapons fired. Daniel Jones completed more than 73 percent of his passes, Alec Pierce averaged more than 20 yards on his four receptions (one of them going for a touchdown) and rookie tight end Tyler Warren had eight catches for almost a hundred yards.

But without a doubt this was Jonathan Taylor's game. Throughout the day he steadily amassed yardage, ripping off runs of 14, 28, 12, 18 and 83 yards as he helped the Colts force overtime against a resilient Falcons squad.

After forcing Atlanta to punt in overtime, the Colts were taking no more chances. They simply kept handing the ball off to Taylor, who carried six times on a seven-play drive, finishing the job with an eight-yard burst up the middle for the game-winning score. Taylor had piled up 244 yards and three touchdowns on 32 carries, adding another 42 yards on three receptions. At 8-2 going into the bye week, nobody would have believed the Colts would not win again all season.

© Getty Images



© Getty Images

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

A quiet offseason means the Jags might be hard-pressed to repeat last year's success

The Jaguars may well still be thinking about the 27-24 squeaker they lost to the Bills in the postseason, but they would do well to focus instead on a fine regular season. In their first year under the new pairing of general manager James Gladstone and head coach Liam Coen, the Jags shook off a forgettable first half of the season to finish with a roar and win the fifth divisional title in their history.

Going into the campaign with their fourth head coach in six seasons was hardly a cause for optimism, but Coen guided his team to top-10 finishes in both points scored and conceded. It was the sign of a balanced team, but if there was an outstanding strength it was a run defense that ranked top of the entire league.

There are challenges ahead, as both the offense and defense took hits in free agency. Travis Etienne (a thousand-yard back in three of his four pro seasons) has gone, as has Pro Bowl linebacker Devin Lloyd. The apparent replacement for Etienne is the underwhelming Chris Rodriguez Jr, who has never had more than 500 yards in a season. Ventrell Miller, a fourth-round draft pick in 2023, is getting buzz as a replacement for Lloyd.

The draft can usually be relied on to plug a few holes, but the Jags had no first-round pick after trading up last year to take Travis Hunter, and when they did get to make a pick, in the second round, they ignored running back and linebacker and opted for a tight end, Nate Boerkircher, who caught just 19 passes in his last college season.

> "There are challenges ahead, as both the offense and defense took hits in free agency"

ESTABLISHED **1993**

HEAD COACH **LIAM COEN**

STADIUM **EVERBANK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **TENNESSEE TITANS**

2025 RECORD **13-4**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.490**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1998, 1999, 2017, 2022, 2025

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **TREVOR LAWRENCE**

DOB: **6 OCTOBER 1999** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **16**

Lawrence still hasn't put everything together to live up to the hype that made him the overall No.1 pick back in 2021, but that doesn't really matter – he is plenty good enough to lead an NFL team.

In his fifth season, he broke the 4,000-yard barrier for the third time and accounted for a franchise record 38 touchdowns (29 passing and another nine on the ground). His run of games to end the season was probably the best ever by a Jaguars QB, so how much more do people want? A couple of upward ticks on his completion percentage (down at just 60.9 last season) would be nice, but that would probably follow with better pass protection – he completed 65 percent of his passes last year when given a clean pocket.

KEY PERSONNEL

TRAVIS HUNTER
WIDE RECEIVER/CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

Hunter's season was cut short by a knee injury, but he flashed ability on both sides of the ball during his rookie season, catching 28 passes as a receiver and breaking up three as a cornerback. The question now is, does he have the durability to hold up as a two-way player?

VENTRELL MILLER
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Miller appeared to take a step back after an impressive rookie campaign, registering just 38 tackles and making two starts in his second season. He needs to work on his coverage skills, but with the departure of Devin Lloyd, he will be counted on to step up.

EMMANUEL PREGNON
GUARD

© Getty Images

Widely viewed as one of the steals of the draft, Pregnon was considered a late first-round talent by some. He is an experienced (he started for three different colleges) and versatile player (seeing time at both left and right guard). He excels at run blocking, and should either contribute immediately, or provide quality depth.

FOYESADE OLUOKUN
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Not a big man, at just 6'2" and 232 pounds, Oluokun is one of the most prolific tacklers in the game, notching more than 100 takedowns for each of the last six seasons. Last year he also defended 11 passes and would be a big name in a bigger market.

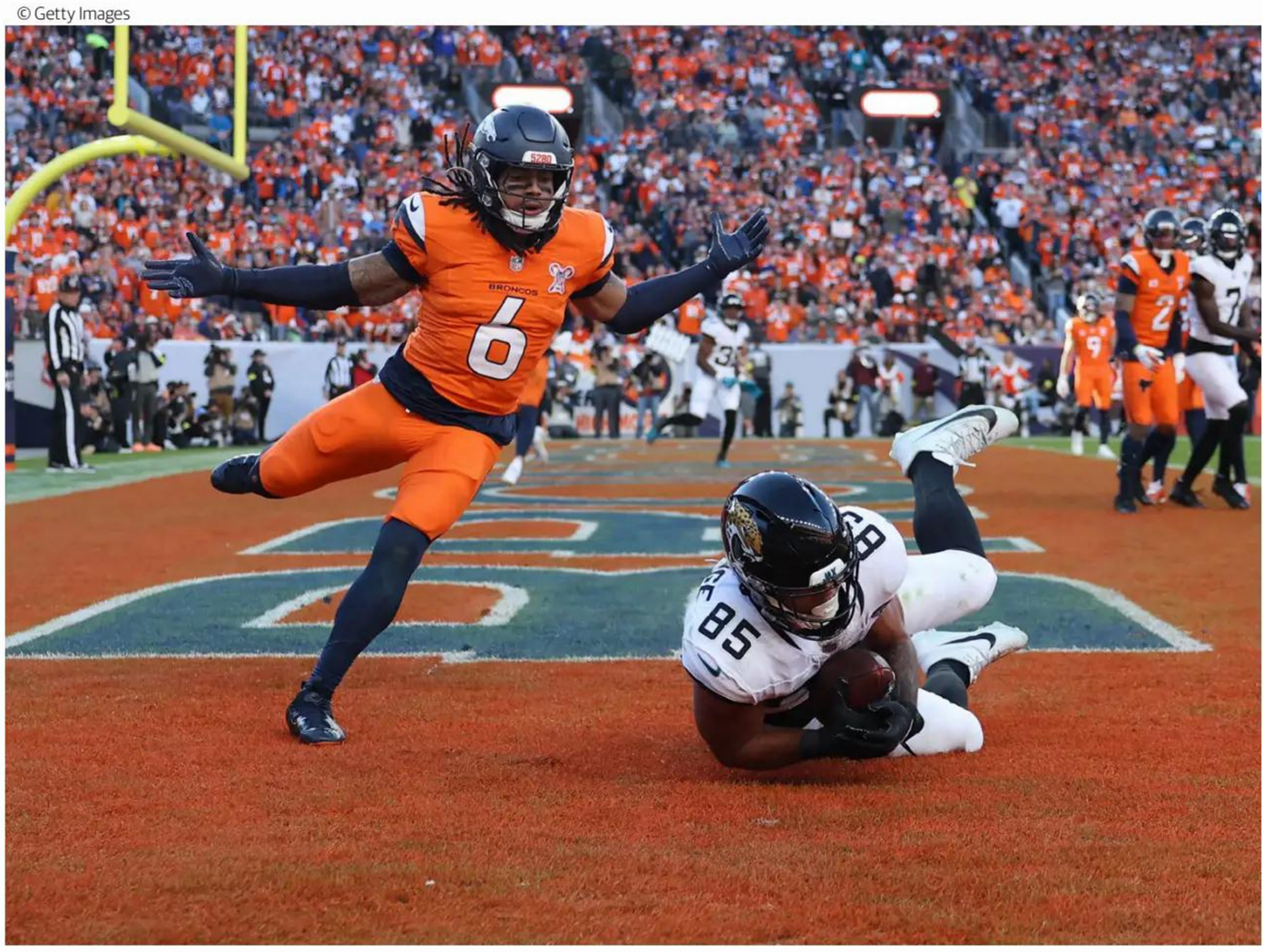
2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Sitting at 5-4 after a loss to divisional rivals Houston, the Jags' season could have gone either way, and might even have ended up much like 2024's 4-13 debacle. Instead, they finished the regular season with a franchise-record eight-game winning streak, including victories over both also-rans and contenders. Four dominant wins had fans dreaming of a deep playoff run, as Jacksonville handled the Chargers, Titans (twice) and Jets by a combined score of 149-36.

The most impressive win, however, came against the Broncos, who would eventually end up in the AFC Championship Game. Trevor Lawrence completed 23 of 36 passes for 279 yards, throwing three touchdowns with no interceptions, and running for another.

The win was a sign of growing maturity as the Jags stood up to the pressure of maintaining their one-game lead over the Texans in the AFC South, and there was no panic even after they failed to pick up a single first down on their first two possessions – they scored on six of seven possessions after that to down the top-ranked team in the AFC.


© Getty Images

TENNESSEE TITANS

Will a new coach, new players and new uniforms bring new results in Nashville?

The Titans expected some growing pains with their overall No.1 draft pick last year, but it was worse than anticipated. Cam Ward struggled in his rookie season, and a team that appeared rudderless sacked its head coach after a 1-5 start. That seemed premature (what did the front office expect with a rookie at quarterback and limited options at receiver?), but the departure of Brian Callahan cleared the way for Robert Saleh to step in, and there are hopes that he can turn things around, although he failed to do that during his time with the Jets.

The Titans were equally inept on offense and defense last year, so there was plenty to work on, and nobody can claim that efforts have not been made on all fronts – on top of personnel changes, the Titans will sport a new look in 2026, with uniforms that hark back to the 'Luv Ya Blue' era of the Houston Oilers.

A free-agency splurge sees a new pair of starting cornerbacks in Alontae Taylor and Cor'Dale Flott, a new defensive end in John Franklin-Myers and a new target for Ward in Wan'Dale Robinson. There was a slew of minor additions as well, and this roster will look very different in 2026.

The terrible 2025 season had one benefit – it allowed the Titans to pick near the top of the first round again, and that meant Ohio State receiver Carnell Tate was available with the fourth overall pick. He will instantly become Ward's top target. The Titans then traded up to pick again at the end of the first round, nabbing Keldric Faulk. He only had two sacks in his last college season but he has the physical tools (6'6", 276 pounds) to excel.

> "The terrible 2025 season had one benefit – it allowed the Titans to pick near the top of the first round again"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **ROBERT SALEH**

STADIUM **NISSAN STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **HOUSTON TEXANS**

2025 RECORD **3-14**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.476**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1960, 1961, 1962, 1967, 1991, 1993, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2020, 2021

CONFERENCE
1999

LEAGUE
1960, 1961

STAR PLAYER **CAM WARD**

DOB: **25 MAY 2002** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **1**

Ward was less than impressive in his first season, but it takes time to adjust to the NFL and he made just enough big-time throws to maintain hope going into his second year. Yes, he completed less than 60 percent of his throws, but one particular stat was impressive – he threw 15 touchdowns as opposed to just seven interceptions. Many experts are saying that only a running quarterback like Mike Vick in his prime could have looked good with the players surrounding Ward last year. He has good mobility, but he was sacked 55 times in his rookie campaign and that needs to change quickly. He has trimmed some excess weight this offseason, and with a concerted effort having been made to improve his array of targets, there is every reason to expect improvement.

KEY PERSONNEL

TONY POLLARD
RUNNING BACK

The Titans were pleased with what Pollard delivered in his first season after joining them in free agency, so they clearly asked him to simply repeat his 2024 season. Pollard obliged with almost identical numbers and offers a solid rushing option for a team searching for an identity.

CARNELL TATE
WIDE RECEIVER

The Titans had options at the No.4 slot in the first round of the draft, but getting help for Cam Ward was the number-one priority, and Tate fills that role. With great hands and body control, he averaged 17.2 yards per reception last year and his polished routes will have Ward salivating.

CHIMERE DIKE
RETURN SPECIALIST

The Titans got decent production out of two fourth-round draftees last year, with Dike and Elic Ayomanor catching 48 and 41 passes, respectively. Dike also excelled as a return man, ripping off two touchdowns on punt returns and earning a spot in the Pro Bowl as well as first-team All-Pro honours.

CEDRIC GRAY
LINEBACKER

Another of the Titans' recent successes from the fourth round of the draft (he was selected in 2024), Gray blossomed in only his second pro campaign, starting 16 games and registering 164 tackles, including seven for loss – a big step-up from no starts and 22 tackles as a rookie.

© Getty Images

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

For much of the season, Tony Pollard was a steady but unspectacular part of the Titans offense. As the team lurched to a 1-11 record he had failed to crack the 100-yard mark in a single game, but had mostly offered solid production.

All of that changed in week 14, as he suddenly exploded for a three-game spell that saw him turn 60 carries into 367 yards and three touchdowns. His brilliant performances helped to wake up a dormant team and they won two of the three games.

He was most impressive in a week 14 outburst against the Browns, where he piled up 161 yards and two scores, including a career-long scoring gallop. In a light snow, the Titans had got the ball back at their 35-yard line after a Browns field goal. Pollard took the handoff and headed right, waiting for a block. After planting his right foot and turning upfield, he burst through the Browns defense, picked up a great downfield block from Van Jefferson, and scooted into the end zone for a 65-yard score.

© Getty Images

DENVER BRONCOS

Already strong on defense, the Broncos are looking to make strides on offense this year

Broncos fans were treated to a cruel rollercoaster ride at the end of last season. No sooner had their team gained revenge for a Wild Card defeat to the Bills in 2024, than they learned they had lost their star quarterback to injury. They ultimately limped to defeat in the AFC Championship Game against a Patriots team that looked very beatable, and the undeniable feeling was that they would have made it to the Super Bowl if Bo Nix had been playing.

Nix had proven his rookie season was no fluke, turning in very similar numbers in his sophomore campaign. The Broncos will now look to him to take a step-up into the ranks of the league's elite, which should keep them firmly in contention, especially as the Chiefs appear to be faltering.

It's clear that the front office saw the offense as the overriding concern for this offseason. Davis Webb steps up into the role of offensive coordinator and will be calling the plays rather than head coach Sean Payton. A major trade on draft day will help – the Broncos sent their 30th overall pick to the Dolphins for Jaylen Waddle. Waddle can be explosive and adds a genuine threat to the passing game.

In free agency the Broncos were quiet, re-signing running back JK Dobbins and linebacker Alex Singleton but failing to bring in any notable talent. Defensively, they will miss John Franklin-Myers on the line after he left to join the Titans – third-round draft pick Tyler Onyedim will get the chance to fill Franklin-Myers' boots, although he is considered more of a run defender than the sort of player who will get after the quarterback.

> "Jaylen Waddle can be explosive and adds a genuine threat to the passing game"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **SEAN PAYTON**

STADIUM **EMPOWER FIELD AT MILE HIGH**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS **LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**

2025 RECORD **14-3**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.512**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1977, 1978, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2025

CONFERENCE

1977, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1997, 1998, 2013, 2015

LEAGUE

1997, 1998, 2015

STAR PLAYER **NIK BONITTO**

DOB: **26 SEPTEMBER 1999** POS: **OUTSIDE LINEBACKER** NO. **15**

The Broncos struck gold with their second-round pick in 2022. Bonitto earned his second Pro Bowl nod after another dominant season. It was doubly satisfying to see his level of play remain so high because the team had given him a massive contract just before last season kicked off. His four-year, $106 million extension made him the highest-paid non-quarterback in Broncos history, and he responded with a career-best 14 sacks.

The performance is perhaps surprising because Bonitto was nursing a wrist injury all season, which required minor surgery at the end of the campaign. Despite this, he played all 17 regular season games.

Blessed with an elite first step, Bonitto seems set to be a menace at the heart of the Broncos defense for years to come.

KEY PERSONNEL

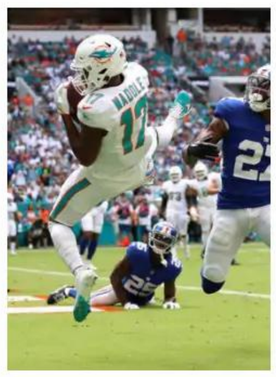
BO NIX
QUARTERBACK

Nix's ankle surgery is not expected to impact on his play this season, which means the Broncos should be getting upper-echelon quarterback production once again. Not yet the kind of player who can put a team on his shoulders, he has plenty of time to develop.

QUINN MEINERZ
GUARD

Meinerz played all 17 regular season games for the third straight season, earning a Pro Bowl berth and All-Pro honours. He settled in his fourth campaign, playing in a more controlled manner, which eliminated mistakes. He is another Bronco justifying a big contract, having signed a four-year $72 million extension in 2024.

JAYLEN WADDLE
WIDE RECEIVER



The dip in Waddle's numbers over the past two seasons can be explained by erratic QB play in Miami – with Denver he has the chance to reassert himself as one of the most dangerous playmakers in the game and he teams with Courtland Sutton to give Bo Nix two outstanding targets.

DAVIS WEBB
OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR

Sean Payton has always called his team's offensive plays, so handing over that job to a 31-year-old speaks volumes to how highly the Broncos rate Webb. One of the new breed of creative offensive minds, Webb may be eased into his new role gradually, but the offense will eventually be his to run.

© Getty Images

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Denver Broncos defense topped the league with 68 sacks and finished third in points allowed. It is fitting, therefore, that a defensive player stepped up in the team's hour of need during the playoffs.

With the Bills and Broncos tied after four quarters of thrilling action, Josh Allen appeared to be moving his team towards a winning score. Denver had failed to put points on the board on their first possession in overtime, so any score from Buffalo would end the game. They had moved from their seven-yard line to their 36 when Allen went for a chunk play, and Brandin Cooks appeared to haul in the pass at the Denver 20-yard line, well within field goal range.

The officials, however, ruled that Cooks had not completed the catch and adjudged that cornerback Ja'Quan McMillian had intercepted the pass. It was one of the most controversial calls of the season, but it stood, and with the help of two huge defensive penalties, Bo Nix was able to drive the Broncos downfield for the game-winning field goal. Denver had earned their first playoff win since 2015.

© Getty Images

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

A rebuilt Chiefs team will be looking to re-establish themselves as the class of the AFC

Appearing in a fourth consecutive Super Bowl would have been a monumental achievement, but the Chiefs were expected to at least make a run at that unlikely feat. Instead, they failed to even make the playoffs, and the fall from grace was stunning.

Suddenly, the Chiefs seemed unable to flip games in the fourth quarter. In fact, their offense slumped when the game was on the line – Patrick Mahomes suggested that opposing teams seemed to be well prepared when the Chiefs pulled out their go-to plays in crunch time. They ranked 22nd in third-down conversions last year, down from 2nd in 2024.

There was no help from other units when it came to scoring – the Chiefs were one of just four teams not to register a single touchdown by their defense or special teams.

To make things worse, the cornerback room fell apart in the offseason, with Trent McDuffie and Jaylen Watson departing, and an already shaky ground game saw Isiah Pacheco join the Lions.

There are a lot of holes to fill, but the Chiefs made efforts, bringing in Kenneth Walker III to solidify the rushing attack and grabbing the top corner in the draft in Mansoor Delane. It was part of concerted effort to boost the defense via the college ranks, with defensive tackle Peter Woods, edge R Mason Thomas and safety Jadon Canady rounding out the Chiefs' first four picks.

With so many new faces, keeping some of the old gang around was important, but does Travis Kelce really justify the $12 million deal he received? For parts of last year he looked uninterested and ineffective but the Chiefs will be hoping for one last charge from their old warhorse.

> **"The Chiefs were one of just four teams not to register a touchdown by their defense or special teams"**

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **ANDY REID**

STADIUM **ARROWHEAD STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS **LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**

2025 RECORD **6-11**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.536**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1962, 1966, 1971, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2003, 2010, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE

2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024

LEAGUE

1962, 1966, 1969, 2019, 2022, 2023

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **PATRICK MAHOMES**

DOB: **17 SEPTEMBER 1995** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **15**

Mahomes struggled last season. His numbers for completion percentage, yards and touchdowns were all career lows (discounting his rookie season, where he only played one game). Much of that can be attributed to the nagging knee injury that finally developed into a serious one in December. His torn ACL and LCL makes his status for the start of the season uncertain.

The star quarterback has declared he intends to be ready to play in week one, which would be a remarkably fast recovery from major surgery, but with Justin Fields stepping in as the backup, fingers will be firmly crossed. However long Mahomes takes, the Chiefs will be praying they can hold things together until he is ready to return, and that he can play at his usual level when he does.

KEY PERSONNEL

CREED HUMPHREY
CENTER

© Getty Images

Humphrey has anchored the Chiefs line since his rookie season. His main strength is as a pass-protector, which fits the KC offense nicely. He made his fourth consecutive Pro Bowl last year and has started all 85 games in his NFL career. That mix of durability and consistency is a valuable commodity.

NICK BOLTON
MIDDLE LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Bolton's lack of pass-rush numbers (and his lack of imposing size) tend to diminish him in the eyes of many, but he is a dominant linebacker, registering an impressive 154 tackles last season. He leads the defense, sets the emotional tone and almost never sits out a play.

CHRIS JONES
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

As the Chiefs look to rebuild their pass-rush, Jones remains the anchor on their defensive line. He led the team in sacks, quarterback hits and tackles for loss last year. As well as his physical play, his experience and football IQ make him a coach on the field.

KENNETH WALKER III
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

The Chiefs have been looking for a dependable backfield presence for some time, and they paid a king's ransom (a three-year deal with $28.7 million in guarantees) to bring in Walker. He offers effective running and receiving and, at 25 years of age, he is entering his prime.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Chiefs had been slogging their way through a tough season and were stuck in neutral, at 5-5, when they took on the 8-2 Colts. For one game, everything came together to give their fans hopes that a revival had just started.

This game had everything Chiefs fans have become used to. Mahomes passed for 352 yards and the Chiefs were lethal in the final quarter. Having slipped into a 20-9 hole, Kansas City got to work, with short passes and effective scrambles from Mahomes setting up Kareem Hunt's two-yard touchdown run. The two-point conversion pulled the Chiefs within three, and after forcing three-and-outs on consecutive Colts drives, they got one last chance. Starting at their six-yard line, Mahomes orchestrated a 15-play drive that ended with Harrison Butker's game-tying field goal.

In overtime, another long drive put Butker in position for his fifth successful kick of the game, and the Chiefs had a winning record. The high did not last for long, as KC lost their remaining six games, but just for a moment, it appeared they had their season back on track.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

After two winning seasons in the last 23 years, the Raiders are starting from scratch... again

The Raiders last won a playoff game in 2002. For most of the two-plus decades since they have been a mediocre team, but never quite bad enough to land the top spot in the draft. Last season, that all changed, and although the one-year tenure of Pete Carroll was little short of a disaster, it did at least give a desperate franchise the top pick in a one-quarterback draft.

Geno Smith's late-career resurgence has been wonderful to witness, but last year it looked like his star was fading and the Raiders have hit the reset button with the best quarterback in the draft, Fernando Mendoza. He will have some weapons to work with, with running back Ashton Jeanty showing potential as a workhorse in his rookie season and Brock Bowers looking to bounce back from an injury-hit campaign.

The Raiders brought in five new players on contracts averaging more than $11m per season during free agency. Leading the way was Tyler Linderbaum, the best center in the game, but they also revamped the defense with edge Kwity Paye and linebackers Quay Walker and Nakobe Dean. The Raiders are also betting that Jalen Nailor is ready to break out after four mediocre seasons in Minnesota. In case Mendoza takes a while to find his feet in the NFL, Kirk Cousins has been brought in to man the quarterback spot.

It's a lot of turnaround, but there would have been more if a trade with Baltimore had been completed. The Ravens offered two first-round picks for Maxx Crosby, but the deal fell through, with the Ravens apparently becoming spooked about Crosby's recovery from knee surgery.

> "The Raiders have hit the reset button with the best quarterback in the draft, Fernando Mendoza"

RAIDERS

ESTABLISHED **1960**

HEAD COACH **KLINT KUBIAK**

STADIUM **ALLEGIANT STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

2025 RECORD **3-14**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.529**

★ ★ **HONOURS** ★ ★

DIVISION
1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1983, 1985, 1990, 2000, 2001, 2002

CONFERENCE
1976, 1980, 1983, 2002

LEAGUE
1967, 1976, 1980, 1983

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **FERNANDO MENDOZA**

DOB: **1 OCTOBER 2003** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **15**

★ **Nothing beats the star power of the No.1 overall draft pick, but the boom-or-bust potential is high.** Mendoza is widely considered to have a high floor, but not the ceiling of flashier prospects of recent seasons. That should mean he won't flame out, but it might mean the Raiders have not got the truly elite franchise player they would like.

After winning the Heisman Trophy thanks to a 72% completion rate, 3,535 passing yards and 41 touchdowns, the Raiders will be hoping he can make a quick impact – he is reckoned to be a pro-ready quarterback.

Great stature (6'5" and 225 pounds) should help Mendoza to withstand the punishment he is going to receive behind a questionable offensive line, but in time his elite accuracy and good arm strength should see him establish himself as an upper-tier quarterback.

KEY PERSONNEL

ASHTON JEANTY
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Jeanty's rookie season was hampered by the poor run-blocking offered by the offensive line in front of him. He often had to break tackles in the backfield and with superior blocking he could become an elite back. He is one of few bright spots on a team that has hit rock bottom.

BROCK BOWERS
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Bowers hurt his knee in the first game of the season and was never fully healthy after that. His numbers therefore dipped (just 64 receptions after an incredible 112 as a rookie), but he showed he was still a threat when playing injured. A return to full health and a new quarterback should see his numbers begin to improve.

MAXX CROSBY
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Trading Crosby would have made a lot of sense as the Raiders enter a rebuild, but he is once more being asked to be the face of the franchise until a new regime (and a new starting quarterback) have had the chance to bed in. He remains one of the top defenders in the game.

TYLER LINDERBAUM
CENTER

© Getty Images

Every team in the league would like a player like Linderbaum anchoring their line, and the Raiders had to overpay to tempt him to join them. If he plays up to expectations and gives them a solid pivot for a rebuilt line, then his $81 million contract could prove to be a bargain.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

By the end of the year, the Raiders had entered that dispiriting twilight zone where wins hurt draft position, leaving their fans largely numb to whatever happens on the field. Ashton Jeanty helped the team tiptoe along that tightrope in week 16, turning in an explosive second-half performance while the team still lost, maintaining their contention for the top overall pick while simultaneously offering some hope for the future.

For his first act, Jeanty showed his prowess as a receiver, lining up on the left and blowing by his defender. Geno Smith's pass forced him to check his stride a little, but he was still able to shrug off a tackle attempt from Myles Bryant to score a 60-yard touchdown that briefly saw the Raiders take the lead. After the Texans established a nine-point advantage, Jeanty struck again, this time showing his patience as a runner. Taking the ball up the middle from midfield, he navigated his way around a mass of bodies, found daylight and shrugged off another tackle attempt from Bryant on his way to a 51-yard score.

It was a tantalising glimpse of the future for a team with a miserable recent past.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Turmoil on the offensive line derailed the Chargers last year and remains an issue in 2026

The Chargers battled their way through injuries last season, with Justin Herbert keeping the offense ticking despite losses on the offensive line and at running back. The starting offensive tackles missed either the whole season (Rashawn Slater) or a big chunk of it (Joe Alt), and Herbert took more than his share of punishment as a result, finishing the campaign with a broken hand.

The toll taken on Herbert was heavy, and by the end of the season the defense could no longer pick up the slack. Herbert sat out one game and then came back to play poorly in the Wild Card defeat to the Patriots. Battered once more after taking six sacks in that game, he must be looking forward to a different script in 2026, one that will be written by a new offensive coordinator, Mike McDaniel, and which will hopefully feature a healthy pair of tackles.

There has been disruption on the line during the offseason, however, with both guards (Zion Johnson and Mekhi Becton) departing. Free agent pickup Cole Strange will get the chance to fill one of the slots. The Chargers were also interested in bringing in Tyler Linderbaum, but eventually settled for another Tyler, Tyler Biadasz, who becomes their starting center and has the quick feet they are looking for at the position. Draftee Jake Slaughter, another center, will be asked to switch to guard.

Defensively, the Chargers will miss edge rusher Odafe Oweh, but was he really worth the $96 million deal handed him by the Washington Commanders? First-rounder Akheem Mesidor will slot in to replace him. The team also successfully handled contact extension talks with safety Derwin James Jr and outside linebacker Tuli Tuipulotu.

> **"There has been disruption on the line during the offseason, with both guards departing"**

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **JIM HARBAUGH**

STADIUM **SOFI STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

2025 RECORD **11-6**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.522**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1960, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1992, 1994, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009

CONFERENCE
1994

LEAGUE
1963

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JUSTIN HERBERT**

DOB: **10 MARCH 1998** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **10**

★ **There are some who claim that Herbert has regressed, but the start of his career (he topped 4,000 passing yards twice and 5,000 yards once in his first three campaigns) would be a tough act for anyone to follow.** Beyond the pure numbers, he remains a highly efficient quarterback with a penchant for the big play and a rushing threat that defenses discount at their peril.

Last season he had career highs in rushing attempts (83) and yardage (498). With both of the Chargers' top running backs missing substantial playing time last year, Herbert was sometimes the team's biggest rushing threat.

The arrival of Mike McDaniel is expected to help – the former Dolphins head coach has gone on the record as saying Herbert has not got close to his ceiling yet.

KEY PERSONNEL

OMARION HAMPTON
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Hampton had a quiet rookie campaign, ruined by two ankle injuries that saw him miss a total of eight games. He flashed his elite potential, however, and if he can shake off the injury bug, he can form a potent backfield partnership with Kimani Vidal, taking some of the pressure off Herbert.

TULI TUIPULOTU
OUTSIDE LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Coaches love players who just keep on getting better, and Tuipulotu fits that bill after seeing his sack totals jump from 4.5 to 8.5 to 13 in his first three pro seasons. The Chargers needed someone to step up as a pass-rusher with the departure of Joey Bosa, and Tuipulotu did just that.

AKHEEM MESIDOR
EDGE

© Getty Images

Mesidor is already 25 years old, and he has a worrying injury history, but the Chargers feel he has the maturity to step in and play right away. Able to utilise both finesse moves and brute power, he has an impressive toolbox as a pass-rusher and should be able to contribute immediately.

JOE ALT
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Alt was everything the Chargers wanted after switching to left tackle last year... but only being available to play in six games was a major disappointment. He performed so well in his time on the pitch that he earned his first Pro Bowl berth, and all indications are his ankle will be good to go this season.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Chargers were 5-1 against the rest of the AFC West, and perhaps no win was more dramatic than that against the Broncos in week three. Denver held a seven-point advantage, with the Chargers facing a second-and-six just outside the Denver 20-yard line as the two-minute warning approached in the fourth quarter.

Justin Herbert took the shotgun snap and appeared to disappear under an avalanche of pass-rushers, only to step forward to avoid the melee, re-gather himself, drift to the left and then throw an awkward-looking pass from the 25-yard line as another defender zeroed in on him.

Downfield, Keenan Allen was tightly covered, but Herbert's off-balance throw was laser-guided and hit Allen five yards deep in the end zone. Replays show that Herbert had been forced to modify his release point to get the ball around the arm of Nik Bonitto, making the accuracy all the more remarkable.

Having tied the game, the Chargers went on to win it, Cameron Dicker kicking a 43-yard field goal as time expired.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

DALLAS COWBOYS

Improvement in defense is imperative if the Cowboys aren't to be also-rans again this year

The Cowboys saw a significant improvement in offensive production last season, jumping from the 21st-ranked unit in terms of points scored, to the seventh. This translated into an improvement of half a game in the team's final record.

In an offense-driven league this seems puzzling, but then you consider that the Cowboys defense was ranked dead last in points allowed and the problem comes into clearer focus – their high-powered offense simply could not compensate.

Ageing journeyman Jadeveon Clowney led the team with a modest 8.5 sacks and the unit as a whole managed just 34. Opposing quarterbacks were able to complete 68.5 percent of their attempts, throwing for 35 touchdowns, while the Cowboys only picked off six passes. Defensive struggles might have been expected when the team's best player, Micah Parsons, was traded away just before the start of the season, but the defense had been porous the year before as well.

It is clear where improvement is needed, but the Cowboys did not have the cap space to go after any big names – safety Jalen Thompson is a solid player but not a game-changer. He is versatile, though, being able to play either safety position as well as lining up in the slot. Dallas then traded up for another safety in the draft, grabbing Caleb Downs from the star-studded Ohio State roster.

Will two new safeties make that much of a difference? Well, maybe they will if fellow first-rounder Malachi Lawrence makes the kind of impact as a pass-rusher that the Cowboys are praying for, and Rashan Gary, a decent pass-rusher himself, was added via trade. It might just be enough to balance the scales and make Dallas a dangerous team once more.

"Will two new safeties make that much of a difference to the Cowboys defense?"

ESTABLISHED **1960**

HEAD COACH **BRIAN SCHOTTENHEIMER**

STADIUM **AT&T STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **WASHINGTON COMMANDERS**

2025 RECORD **7-9-1**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.493**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021, 2023

CONFERENCE

1966, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1992, 1993, 1995

LEAGUE

1971, 1977, 1992, 1993, 1995

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **DAK PRESCOTT**

DOB: **29 JULY 1993** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **4**

Prescott is coming off one of his best years as a pro. He broke the 4,000-yard barrier for the fourth time and threw 30 touchdowns, wining a place in the Pro Bowl and getting votes as Comeback Player of the Year after his injury-shortened 2024 campaign.

He is always capable of uncorking a big-time throw, and can take over games (the Cowboys were 4-1-1 in the six games he passed for over 300 yards last year).

Prescott described 2025 as "frustrating", and having turned in what was arguably the best season of his career, a postseason berth might have been expected. He hinted that he was less than satisfied with the support offered by the defense, which could become a problem if the problems on that side of the ball continue.

KEY PERSONNEL

QUINNEN WILLIAMS
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

In an attempt to shore up a struggling defense, the Cowboys traded for the former Jet, and he immediately brought energy to a team that badly needed it. He excels as a run-defender but can also get quick pressure up the middle to destroy a passing play.

JAVONTE WILLIAMS
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

There was always a risk that Williams might try free agency again after his breakout 2025 campaign (1,201 rushing yards and 11 total touchdowns), but he declared he had fallen in love with Dallas and the feeling was clearly mutual – he signed a three-year extension in the offseason.

GEORGE PICKENS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Pickens was another addition to the offense who paid off in a big way last year. His 93 catches, 1,429 receiving yards and nine touchdowns were all career highs and he teamed with CeeDee Lamb to give Dallas one of the top wideout pairings in the game.

RASHAN GARY
DEFENSIVE LINEMAN

© Getty Images

Draftee Malachi Lawrence might need some time to settle in, but the Cowboys need help immediately, and Gary should provide that. A big body, at 6'5" and 277 pounds, he is a steady player, averaging around eight sacks per season as a full-time starter, and should deliver similar production in Dallas.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

For a while during the 2025 season it looked like the Dallas offense was good enough to win on its own, but when all parts of the team contributed the results could be spectacular. In a week seven encounter with Washington, all three units put points on the board in spectacular fashion to score a memorable victory.

After some early sparring saw Dallas take a 10-8 lead, CeeDee Lamb scored on a deep pass to take control of the game, Dak Prescott making the most of excellent protection to survey the field before delivering the strike that Lamb took 74 yards to the end zone.

Midway through the second quarter, special teams struck, with Brandon Aubrey connecting on a monster 61-yard field goal, and the game was well and truly out of sight by the time the defense got in on the act. DaRon Bland's 68-yard interception return for a score made it 41-15 as the Cowboys put their division rivals in their place.

A huge day for Jayden Daniels, who rushed for 156 yards on 22 carries, put the finishing touch to a memorable afternoon.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

NEW YORK GIANTS

New and returning faces have the future looking bright for Big Blue

Not many teams come out of a four-win season with high hopes for the campaign to come, but the New York Giants have ample reasons for optimism in 2026. After three-and-a-half seasons, which included a Coach of the Year award in 2022 before things turned decidedly sour, Brian Daboll is out and in at head coach is John Harbaugh after nearly two decades with the Ravens.

A combined 11-33 record after his successful first season meant that Daboll couldn't feel too hard done by, but in his defence the Giants suffered badly with injuries throughout 2025. On offense alone, Malik Nabers, Cam Skattebo and Jaxson Dart all missed significant time, and having that trifecta healthy will be key in 2026.

Things are also looking promising on the other side of the ball. The Giants benefitted from two top-ten picks in the 2026 draft, taking consensus All-American LB Arvell Reese fifth overall (as well as guard Francis Mauigoa with the 10th pick) to reinforce what should be one of the most formidable defensive units in the league. Reese joins the likes of Brian Burns, Kayvon Thibodeaux and Abdul Carter (who enjoyed an impressive rookie season in 2025), and while New York's defensive results did not match its talent for much of the season, a strong finish down the stretch suggested that there's substantial scope for improvement this year.

The NFC East has long been one of the most competitive divisions in football, but after seeing each of their rivals take the crown at least three times over the past 15 years, the G-Men will be hopeful of competing for a first divisional title since 2011 – and maybe even more.

> "The G-Men will be hopeful of competing for a first divisional title since 2011 – and maybe even more"

ESTABLISHED **1925**

HEAD COACH **JOHN HARBAUGH**

STADIUM **METLIFE STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **WASHINGTON COMMANDERS, PHILADELPHIA EAGLES, DALLAS COWBOYS, NEW YORK JETS**

2025 RECORD **4-13**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.498**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1933, 1934, 1935, 1938, 1939, 1941, 1944, 1946, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1997, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2011

CONFERENCE

1956, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2007, 2011

LEAGUE

1927, 1934, 1938, 1956, 1986, 1990, 2007, 2011

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JAXSON DART**

DOB: **13 MAY 2003** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **6**

From his name alone, you'd think Jaxson Dart was always destined to be a quarterback. But the first-round pick out of Ole Miss demonstrated in his rookie season that it was more than nominative determinism that earned him his shot in the NFL. Dart took just four weeks to unseat Russell Wilson as the Giants' starter, and he quickly won over fans with an aggressive, physical style of play.

All four of New York's wins in the 2025 season came with Dart under center. He's not been afraid to court controversy, introducing Donald Trump at a rally during the offseason to the chagrin of some of his teammates, and his willingness to take hits has already led to multiple concussions, but Dart has the talent and the mentality to potentially be a franchise player for the Giants.

KEY PERSONNEL

CAM SKATTEBO
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Though he managed only five starts before an ankle dislocation ended his season, Skattebo quickly became one of the breakout stars of 2025 – both for his physical, borderline reckless running style and for his outsized off-field personality. He'll no doubt be back in the headlines in 2026.

MALIK NABERS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

A brutal ACL tear ended Nabers' sophomore season prematurely, but his return is perhaps the biggest boost to the Giants offense. Lest we forget, the former LSU Tiger put up historic reception numbers as a rookie, and he'll be eager to reestablish himself as one of the league's leading lights.

JOHN HARBAUGH
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

After 18 glittering seasons with the Ravens, Harbaugh's firing instantly made him the most coveted coach on the market this offseason. The Giants didn't wait around to make their move. The new head coach has carte blanche to shape this young, talented roster into a championship team.

BRIAN BURNS
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Burns has continued his ascent since his move from the Panthers in 2024, earning a Second-team All-Pro selection in 2025. A vocal and inspirational organiser on defense who leads by example, he logged a phenomenal 16.5 sacks last season – the second-highest total in the NFL.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Week 4 win against the Chargers in Jaxson Dart's first start was a great moment, but the real coming out party for the Giants' new 'Batman and Robin' duo of Dart and Cam Skattebo came two weeks later.

Against the reigning Super Bowl champions and hated divisional rivals the Eagles, New York came out firing and ultimately cruised to a 34-17 victory at MetLife Stadium. Dart threw for 195 yards and a touchdown while adding another with his legs, while Skattebo absolutely torched the Philly defense for 110 total yards and three scores. Cue much affectionate headbutting between the pair.

In a season marred by injury, there's a sense of what might have been looking back on this game – just two weeks later Skattebo suffered a horrendous ankle dislocation that would ultimately sideline him for the rest of the season. Despite that setback, however, this dominant win gave perhaps the clearest idea yet of what this young Giants team can achieve when fully fit and firing.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Steadying a declining offense will be the key to the Eagles' season

Shane Steichen, Brian Johnson, Kellen Moore, Kevin Patullo... these were the offensive coordinators for the last four seasons in Philadelphia. Next season there will be yet another new name, Sean Mannion. The upheaval caught up with the Eagles last year, as they sank to 19th in scoring offense and 24th in offensive yardage.

This team has too many weapons to be languishing in the bottom half of NFL offenses. Eagles fans kept waiting for the proverbial switch to be flipped, for their potentially potent offense to come to life, but it never happened. They scored more than 30 points just four times all year and bowed out in the Wild Card round when a Super Bowl repeat seemed a genuine possibility.

There will be nervous eyes on Saquon Barkley, who saw his rushing yardage almost halve compared to 2024. Granted, his 2024 campaign was one of the best in league history, but his return to earth grounded (excuse the pun) the Philly offense.

Options for improving the team were limited. The largest contract the Eagles handed out in free agency was to bring back their punter, Braden Mann, but Tariq Woolen will upgrade the cornerback room and Marquise Brown will help to soften the blow of losing AJ Brown, who was traded to the Patriots.

The draft offered more options for the Eagles, and first-round receiver Makai Lemon from USC should be a great fit for the offense, while tight end Elijah Stowers and offensive tackle Markel Bell should help improve the depth at those positions.

It was an offseason of tweaks, then – but the Eagles didn't need much more than that.

> "This team has too many weapons to be languishing in the bottom half of NFL offenses"

ESTABLISHED **1933**

HEAD COACH **NICK SIRIANNI**

STADIUM
LINCOLN FINANCIAL FIELD

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **NEW YORK GIANTS**

2025 RECORD **11-6**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.481**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1947, 1948, 1949, 1980, 1988, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2022, 2024, 2025

CONFERENCE
1960, 1980, 2004, 2017, 2022, 2024

LEAGUE
1948, 1949, 1960, 2017, 2024

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JALEN HURTS**

DOB: **7 AUGUST 1998** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **1**

★ **Hurts has never been the flashiest of quarterbacks – he has only come close to a 4,000-yard season once (he passed for 3,858 yards in 2023), but his value as a dual-threat player is undeniable.** In six seasons he has 110 passing touchdowns and 63 rushing scores, and his value to the team was underlined last year as the offense struggled. He would no doubt have benefitted from a more potent ground attack, but with Saquon Barkley looking almost human, Hurts threw a career-high 25 touchdowns and adding another eight on the ground.

His efforts were rewarded with a third place in the Pro Bowl and much now will depend on how he meshes with new offensive coordinator Sean Mannion, who was the Green Bay quarterbacks coach last season.

KEY PERSONNEL

SEAN MANNION
OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR

© Getty Images

The Eagles interviewed 17 coaches to replace Kevin Patullo, and Mannion beat them all despite having no play-calling experience. His hiring is a risk, but the Eagles would love him to bring continuity to the offense. His emphasis on play-action is expected to help Jalen Hurts thrive.

COOPER DEJEAN
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

DeJean continues to scale the NFL ladder rapidly. In just his second season he was named First-team All-Pro after registering 93 tackles, two interceptions and 16 pass break-ups. The sky appears to be the limit for the man some people are already calling the best defensive back in the game.

DEVONTA SMITH
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

The Eagles starting wide receivers were a potent pairing last year, but with AJ Brown having departed Smith will need to be the clear No.1 target this year. He caught 77 passes for 1,008 yards during the 2025 season, and has a new Brown (Marquise) to work with this season.

MAKAI LEMON
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

The Eagles liked Lemon so much they traded up for him, and they would not have got him had they stayed put because Pittsburgh was about to pull the trigger on the speedy USC pass-catcher. Though not the tallest, he does his damage after the catch and should bring some juice to the offense.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

One of the plus points from a disappointing season in Philadelphia was the emergence of Jalyx Hunt. After playing sparingly as a rookie (he was a third-round draft pick in 2024), Hunt came on strong in his second year, and started to rack up some impressive numbers. His week seven performance against Minnesota was a coming-out party, highlighted by his first career interception.

Facing a third-and-five, Carson Wentz was hit as he delivered the ball and Hunt picked it off, before heading upfield for a 42-yard pick-six. It was a canny call by defensive coordinator Vic Fangio, perfectly executed by Hunt, who lined up at defensive end and then dropped back into shallow coverage. It was the ignition point for Hunt, who went on to register 38 tackles, 6.5 sacks, 19 quarterback hits and two more interceptions over the remainder of the season. He also recovered a fumble and had three pass break-ups over the same 11-week period, establishing himself as one of the brightest spots on the Eagles defense. He could be in line for a big contract extension after this season.

© Getty Images

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

A massive defensive overhaul could see the Commanders bounce straight back into contention

The Commanders would love to just forget the 2025 season. Seemingly poised to compete again after an impressive 2024 campaign, the wheels came off early, and they stayed off. Jayden Daniels, looking to build on a superb rookie campaign, could not stay healthy. The longest starting streak he could manage was just three games.

With Daniels absent for the majority of the year, the offense struggled, and any hopes that the defense might bail them out were quickly quashed – a unit that struggled in 2024 was downright terrible last year and new defensive coordinator Daronte Jones has a big job on his hands.

One bright spot was the 2025 rookie class, with many contributors emerging. The running game remained effective and should be again this season. Jacory Croskey-Merritt (one of those promising rookies) rushed for 805 yards and eight touchdowns and looks set to become the full-time starter this year.

This offseason, the focus has predictably been on the defense, and money was thrown around liberally in free agency. Odafe Oweh is a talented player who hasn't quite put it all together yet, and two teams have let him walk, but the Commanders felt he was worth a four-year, $96 million gamble. More cash was splashed on linebacker Leo Chenal, defensive lineman Tim Settle, corner Amik Robertson, safety Nick Cross and edge K'Lavon Chaisson. Along with top draft pick Sonny Styles, that could mean seven new starters on defense – that's a big turnaround, but nobody can accuse the Commanders of not trying to fix their problems.

> "Including top draft pick Sonny Styles, there could be seven new starters on defense – that's a big turnaround"

ESTABLISHED **1932**

HEAD COACH **DAN QUINN**

STADIUM **NORTHWEST STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **DALLAS COWBOYS**

2025 RECORD **5-12**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.502**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1936, 1937, 1940, 1942, 1943, 1945, 1972, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1999, 2012, 2015, 2020

CONFERENCE
1972, 1982, 1983, 1987, 1991

LEAGUE
1937, 1942, 1982, 1987, 1991

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JAYDEN DANIELS**

DOB: **18 DECEMBER 2000** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **5**

★ **Every Commanders fan will have fingers crossed this year, hoping that Daniels' injury-riddled 2025 campaign was an aberration.** He missed two games after hurting his ankle, then one game with a hamstring pull and three more after suffering a nasty elbow injury against Green Bay. When he tried to come back, in week 14, he aggravated the elbow injury and was shut down for the remainder of the season.

The young quarterback will have earned the respect of his teammates for his willingness to repeatedly come back from injury, but they will want him to stay upright in 2026. He will be working with David Blough as the team's new offensive coordinator, but Blough has been on the Commanders' staff since 2024 and the two are familiar with each other.

KEY PERSONNEL

JACORY CROSKEY-MERRITT
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Croskey-Merritt was a pleasant surprise in 2025, showing an ability to generate yardage with a small number of carries (his two 100-yard outings came off 14- and 11-carry games). He needs to improve as a receiver, but the Commanders will be keen to give him more touches in his second year.

LAREMY TUNSIL
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

The Commanders brought Tunsil in to protect Jayden Daniels' blindside, and his pass-protection was as solid as ever, but Tunsil surprised many by also developing more as a run-blocker. His improved play in that department helped keep the Washington ground game in the league's upper echelon.

SONNY STYLES
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

As a former safety, first-round draft pick Styles is a good fit for a modern, speed-oriented NFL defense. With sub-4.5 speed, he is a lethal tackler and is viewed as a player with both a high ceiling and a high floor. A sure tackler, he should add elite athleticism from day one.

ODAFE OWEH
EDGE

© Getty Images

Oweh has proved an ability to turn it on when he wants to – he had zero sacks in five games with Baltimore last year, but notched 7.5 in 12 games after being traded to the Chargers. Which version will the Commanders get? If it's the latter, he will add a much-needed jolt on defense.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Commanders made a respectable start to the season and when Jayden Daniels returned from his first injury, after missing two games, they put together their most complete performance of the year against a good Chargers outfit. After spotting LA a 10-point lead, the Commanders got down to work. Jacory Croskey-Merritt ripped off a 15-yard touchdown run on his way to a 111-yard performance, and he put the Commanders into the lead in the third quarter with a five-yard dash.

Daniels finished the scoring with an eight-yard strike to Deebo Samuel, and with the help of two Matt Gay field goals, Washington had scored 27 unanswered points.

The defense, the Commanders' Achilles heel all season, also held up its side of the bargain, sacking Justin Herbert four times and Trey Lance once. Dorance Armstrong (another Commander to miss most of the season through injury) led the way with two sacks.

It was shocking that, following such a complete game, which saw them lift their record to 3-2, the Commanders would lose their next eight contests.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

CHICAGO BEARS

The Bears seem set on offense – but the defense needs quite a bit of work

Are the Bears back? Last year they won their first playoff game since the 2010 season, and they seem to have their quarterback in place. The arrival of Ben Johnson as head coach saw them jump from 28th in the league in points scored to ninth, but there was a similar effect in reverse on the defense, which fell from 13th to 23rd. These are not the Monsters of the Midway... but the NFL has changed and having a star quarterback is now almost essential for success.

Surrounding that quarterback with talent is also essential, and Chicago have been building steadily in that regard. Two rookies did well last year – tight end Colston Loveland lived up to his first-round draftee status, catching 58 passes for 713 yards, while Luther Burden was only a step behind with 47 receptions for 652 yards. With Rome Odunze expected to take a step forward in his third year, this is a young and talented receiving corps for Caleb Williams to work with.

It's no surprise the defense has slipped. From 2019 to 2024, the Bears were the only NFL team that did not draft a defensive player in the first round of the draft. They have still found some talent (Gervon Dexter has steadily improved after being a second-round selection in 2023) and that unlikely streak came to an end when safety Dillon Thieneman was taken with the 25th overall pick in April. He will join top free-agent signing Coby Bryant in a new safety pairing. It was a much-needed pick as the Bears lost three safeties in free agency – Jaquan Brisker, Chauncey Gardner-Johnson and Kevin Byard (who led the NFL with seven interceptions last year).

> "Surrounding a quarterback with talent is also essential, and Chicago have been building steadily in that regard"

ESTABLISHED **1920**

HEAD COACH **BEN JOHNSON**

STADIUM **SOLDIER FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **GREEN BAY**

2025 RECORD **11-6**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.550**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1933, 1934, 1937, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1946, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2018, 2025

CONFERENCE

1956, 1963, 1985, 2006

LEAGUE

1921, 1932, 1933, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1946, 1963, 1985

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **CALEB WILLIAMS**

DOB: **18 NOVEMBER 2001** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **18**

How long has it been since the Bears were this sure about their quarterback going into a new season? Jay Cutler gave them a decent stretch of seasons, but for the most part it has been one stop-gap player after another, interspersed with the occasional high draft pick who didn't pan out.

Williams has put a stop to that, and if he stays healthy the Bears will be truly set at quarterback for the first time since the days of Sid Luckman.

Williams made big steps in his first year under Ben Johnson, and with familiarity now building, the future looks very bright. He still needs to be more willing to accept the easy check-down passes (a 58.1 percent completion rate is not good enough), but dare we hope that Chicago's quarterback curse has been broken?

KEY PERSONNEL

GARRETT BRADBURY
CENTER

© Getty Images

Bradbury may only hold the center position for a year or two, but it is critical that he is able to effectively replace the retired Drew Dalman. Logan Jones, this year's second-round draft pick, will be stepping in eventually, but the Bears need to build on the momentum of last season.

COBY BRYANT
SAFETY

© Getty Images

The effort to rebuild the defense begins with the signing of Coby Bryant, who brings 227 career tackles, seven interceptions and a Super Bowl ring. A versatile player who has turned out at multiple spots in the defensive backfield, he allowed the second-lowest passer rating among safeties last season.

D'ANDRE SWIFT
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Ben Johnson's outside zone scheme is a good fit for both Swift (who rushed for over a thousand yards last year) and Kyle Monangai (a rookie last year, who added another 783 yards). The Bears will be employing a true two-headed backfield again this season.

MONTEZ SWEAT
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

The Bears struggled to get to the quarterback last year, but Sweat did his best, piling up 10 sacks, the second-best mark of his career. He has tended to alternate good and mediocre seasons, and the Bears badly need him to stay at the top of his game if their defense is to improve.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Football can be cruel. The greatest moment of the Bears' season was followed just minutes later by the most crushing. Trailing the Rams by seven points as time ticked below one minute in the final period of their divisional playoff game, the Bears faced a first-and-10 from the Los Angeles 20-yard line. Luther Burden caught a six-yard pass and then two more passes fell incomplete. It was do-or-die on fourth-and-four with 27 ticks left on the clock – and the Rams even burned a timeout to crank up the tension at Soldier Field.

Caleb Williams dropped back and then turned to run for his life as three Rams broke free and zeroed in on him. Still backpedalling at the 40-yard line, he heaved up a deep pass to the end zone… where Cole Kmet hauled it in for the touchdown. The pass was difficult to fathom, as Williams was in the process of getting buried by two defenders as he delivered it, but the game was heading to overtime, where Harrison Mevis' field goal broke the Bears' hearts.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

DETROIT LIONS

If a rebuilt offensive line holds up, the Lions will be a force to contend with again

The Lions have too much talent to be languishing in third place in their division and missing out on the playoffs. Jared Goff threw 34 touchdowns and passed for 4,564 yards, Jahmyr Gibbs rushed for 1,223 yards and 13 scores and Aidan Hutchinson had 14.5 sacks on his return from a broken leg. This should have been a team looking to make a deep playoff run, so what went wrong?

The worrying thing for Lions fans is that it was the offensive line that struggled last season... and things got a whole lot more complicated in the offseason. Goff struggled when put under pressure, and a team weakness was made worse when left tackle Taylor Decker asked for a trade. The immediate solution will be to switch All-Pro right tackle Penei Sewell over to the left, but it is not automatic that he will dominate there as he does at his familiar position.

The right tackle spot will be filled by first-round draft pick Blake Miller, who has experience (54 starts in college) and a reputation as a dominating blocker. The changes continue, with a new center stepping in following the acquisition of Cade Mays. That's three changes on the line, and it may take time for things to gel.

The run game has taken a hit with the departure of David Montgomery, but Isiah Pacheco is an interesting replacement and if he can rediscover his early-career form he will be a real asset.

Defensively, the Lions have wanted to pair Aidan Hutchinson with another top pass-rusher for a while. Al-Quadin Muhammad fitted the bill last year but he's departed in free agency and second-rounder Derrick Moore (like Hutchinson, an ex-Michigan Wolverine) will try to fill the role this year.

> "There have been three changes on the offensive line, and it may take time for things to gel"

ESTABLISHED **1930**

HEAD COACH **DAN CAMPBELL**

STADIUM **FORD FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **CHICAGO BEARS**

2024 RECORD **9-8**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.467**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1935, 1983, 1991, 1993, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
1952, 1953, 1954, 1957

LEAGUE
1935, 1952, 1953, 1957

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **PENEI SEWELL**

DOB: **9 OCTOBER 2000** POS: **LEFT TACKLE** NO. **58**

It feels strange to write 'left tackle' when talking about Sewell – since the start of his career he has been the state-of-the-art on the right side of the line, but circumstances are forcing the Lions to unseat him. Left tackle is traditionally the more critical position on the offensive line, and it is by no means certain that Sewell will make a smooth transition.

He did play at left tackle in college and at times during his rookie season, so it's not as if this will be completely new territory for him.

The consensus opinion seems to be that Sewell could excel at any point on the line, and could probably have a decent effort at playing running back, tight end or defensive lineman as well – he's just that good of a football player.

KEY PERSONNEL

JARED GOFF
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Goff now has more passing yards as a Lion than he did as a Ram, and he is on a run of four consecutive 4,000-yard seasons. Durable as well as consistent and productive (he has started 17 games in four straight seasons as well) he is one of the top gunslingers in the game.

JAHMYR GIBBS
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

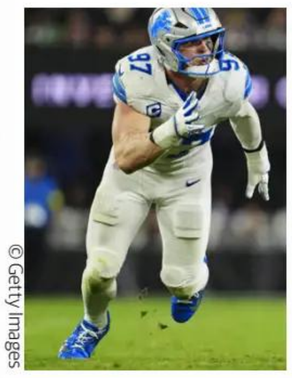
Gibbs has performed superbly as part of a two-headed backfield, but also has the ability to function as a workhorse if Isiah Pacheco does not deliver the goods. Gibbs has played in 49 games and has 49 touchdowns, two more than the legendary Barry Sanders managed in his first three years as a Lion.

JACK CAMPBELL
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Aidan Hutchinson grabs most of the headlines on the Lions defense, but Campbell is the most consistent defender on the team. After being voted First-team All-Pro after making 176 tackles in 2025, he was rewarded with a four-year, $81 million extension.

AIDAN HUTCHINSON
DEFENSIVE END


© Getty Images

Hutchinson bounced back with a vengeance last year, turning in career-highs in sacks (14.5), tackles (54) and quarterback hits (35). His high motor and tenacity, combined with a range of counter moves when his first attempt is blocked, mark him out as a special talent.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Not all great plays come in winning efforts. One of the best catches in the entire NFL last season came in a game the Lions ended up losing, from a player who would miss the last eight games of the season with a back injury. The Chiefs were 20-10 ahead in the fourth quarter of their week six matchup with Detroit, but the second play of that quarter brought renewed hope to the Lions faithful.

Facing a second-down at the Kansas City four-yard line, Jared Goff was given great protection by his offensive line, which allowed him to scan his options patiently. He finally selected tight end Sam LaPorta, who was moving towards the back of the end zone under tight coverage from Chamarri Conner.

Goff's pass was high and fast, forcing LaPorta to continue towards the backline before leaping high into the air, snagging the ball with one hand while Conner was draped all over his other arm, and then somehow tapping both feet down to get the touchdown.

"What a catch! Touchdown!" enthused Mike Tirico in the commentary booth. "There was no space, and LaPorta brings it in!"

© Getty Images

GREEN BAY PACKERS

Can the Packers hold together until Micah Parsons returns from injury?

First the good news – the Packers made the playoffs for an NFL-record 38th time last season, the sixth time in seven seasons under Matt LaFleur. Now the bad news – they seem to be trending downwards. They were NFC North champions in LaFleur's first three seasons, but have since seen each of their divisional rivals take turns in the top spot. How do they turn things around?

Defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley has left to coach the Dolphins, and his replacement is a head-scratcher. Jonathan Gannon was head coach of an Arizona team with abysmal defenses over the past three seasons, but he did much better as defensive coordinator with the Eagles before that. Maybe he can do better with the talent in Green Bay.

That talent will eventually include Micah Parsons, after the stunning trade just before last season opened. The loss of Parsons to an ACL injury contributed to the four-game skid that ended the 2025 regular season, and he will not be ready to return until mid-October.

The Packers can't wait, because defense is very much the key to this season – they only managed seven interceptions last year and allowed opposing QBs to complete 65.6 percent of their passes. The addition of Benjamin St-Juste via free agency helps the cornerback room, as does the drafting of Brandon Cisse, while the pass-rush should be helped by free agent Javon Hargrave and draftees Chris McClellan and Dani Dennis-Sutton.

On offense, how will Jordan Love manage without his top target from last year? The loss of Romeo Doubs and the trade of Dontayvion Wicks leaves the receiver corps looking very thin indeed. Last year's top draft pick, Matthew Golden, needs to break out.

> "Defense is very much the key to this season – the Packers only managed seven interceptions last year"

ESTABLISHED **1919**

HEAD COACH **MATT LAFLEUR**

STADIUM **LAMBEAU FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **CHICAGO BEARS**

2025 RECORD **9-7-1**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.538**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1936, 1938, 1939, 1944, 1967, 1972, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021

CONFERENCE

1960, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1996, 1997, 2010

LEAGUE

1929, 1930, 1931, 1936, 1939, 1944, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1996, 2010

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **MICAH PARSONS**

DOB: **26 MAY 1999** POS: **LINEBACKER** NO. **1**

★ **Parsons' status was still up in the air leading into the new season, but he was expected to miss at least the first four weeks.** As far as Green Bay are concerned, they can't get him back quickly enough – he was everything they hoped for when they traded for him in August last year.

Parsons registered 12.5 sacks in the 14 games he played. He is a disruptor, one of those defenders that can wreck an offense, or force it to play in a way it does not naturally want to. His brilliance (and age, he only just turned 27) makes the price of two first-round draft picks seem insignificant.

With Parsons expected to make a full recovery from his ACL tear, this should continue to be viewed as one of the best trades in NFL history.

KEY PERSONNEL

JORDAN LOVE
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

The Green Bay offense leans heavily on the run (they were seventh in rushes last year, while only 27th in passing attempts), or Love would have more eye-catching numbers. Despite this he is widely considered to be a top-10 quarterback, having thrown 83 career touchdowns compared to just 31 interceptions.

TUCKER KRAFT
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Kraft is another Packer coming back from injury, but he tore his ACL in early November and is expected back by August, so he should be good to go in week one. The Packers, and Jordan Love, need him as the receiving corps has been seriously depleted.

JOSH JACOBS
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

His recent legal issues are a concern, but one of the reasons the Packers lean so heavily on the run is because of the effectiveness of Jacobs. He missed two games last year or would almost certainly have cracked the thousand-yard barrier for the fifth time in his career.

BRANDON CISSE
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

The Packers have to improve on the back-end of their defense, and Cisse should contribute right away. He's not known as a ballhawk, but anticipation and awareness are his strong suits, and he does have the long arms needed to reach in and break up passes.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

When Micah Parsons was at his rampaging best, the Packers looked like they were in serious contention for the NFC North championship, never more so than when they saw off divisional rivals Minnesota, Detroit and Chicago in consecutive games, starting in week 12.

It was a devastating burst, which put Green Bay on top of the division. Against Minnesota, Parsons had two sacks and the Pack won despite Josh Jacobs missing the game through injury. The next week, Detroit fell as Jordan love threw four touchdowns and Parsons notched another 2.5 sacks.

In what would turn out to be their final win of the regular season, it was Love (three more touchdowns) and Jacobs (86 rushing yards and a score) who paced the team as they continued to build momentum, overhauling the Bears to take top spot in the NFC North.

The following week, Parsons was injured and Green Bay lost their last four games of the regular season, before falling in the Wild Card round to the Bears. It was a shocking turnaround having fought and scratched their way to the top of the division.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Can the Vikings find an answer at quarterback this season?

The Vikings remain one of the 12 teams to have never won a Super Bowl, and they seem as far away as ever following a disappointing 2025 campaign. Last year they turned their back on Sam Darnold, who had passed for 4,319 yards and 35 touchdowns in 2024, and hitched their wagon to second-year pro JJ McCarthy. All Darnold did was lead the Seahawks to a Super Bowl win, while McCarthy struggled badly.

Things do not look like they will get better any time soon, unless McCarthy makes big strides in his second season as the starter. Kyler Murray has been brought in, and there has been some buzz that he will be the starter when the new season opens, but his star seems to be fading, and a quarterback controversy is the last thing the Vikings wants.

The Vikings were strong on defense last year and should be again this time around, even with legendary safety Harrison Smith most likely hanging up his cleats. There is talent in Andrew Van Ginkel, Dallas Turner, Jalen Redmond and Eric Wilson, and the Vikes went defense with their first three picks in the draft... but that leaves an offense that ranked 26th in points last year looking decidedly neglected.

This is an underpowered offense, with nothing to hang its hat on. Justin Jefferson is an all-world receiver, but without a capable quarterback he can't do much. Whoever plays quarterback could have a good line to work behind if the injury bug doesn't strike again. The retirement of center Ryan Kelly after multiple concussions leaves the spot up in the air, and it looks like sixth-year pro Blake Brandel will get the nod, but he is far from proven.

> "The Vikings were strong on defense last year and should be again this time around"

ESTABLISHED **1960**

HEAD COACH **KEVIN O'CONNELL**

STADIUM **US BANK STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **GREEN BAY PACKERS**

2025 RECORD **9-8**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.519**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1989, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2017, 2022

CONFERENCE

1969, 1973, 1974, 1976

LEAGUE

1969

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **DALLAS TURNER**

DOB: **FEBRUARY 2003** POS: **LINEBACKER** NO. **15**

★ **The Vikings didn't need much from Turner in his rookie season – he was playing behind Andrew Van Ginkel and Jonathan Greenard.** Last year, that changed, as both men in front of him had their injury woes and Turner was asked to step up. He responded by leading the team with eight sacks and his role will be even bigger this year after Greenard was traded to the Eagles.

A versatile player who can play on the left or right of the defense, Turner really opened eyes with a stretch of three games, from week 11 to week 13, as he filled in for Greenard. In those three games he recorded five tackles for a loss, 14 pressures, and four sacks. If he can consistently put up that kind of production the Vikings will be delighted.

KEY PERSONNEL

JALEN REDMOND
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Redmond made a huge jump in his second season, seeing 793 snaps as opposed to 236 in his first. He recorded six sacks, eight quarterback hits and 62 tackles, a brilliant return for a former undrafted free agent who started his career in the UFL.

ERIC WILSON
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Another former undrafted free agent, Wilson returned to the Vikings last season and had the best campaign of his nine-year career. Expected to do most of his work on special teams, he started 16 games and was second on the team with 115 tackles, adding 6.5 sacks.

JUSTIN JEFFERSON
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Jefferson struggled with below-par quarterback play last season, barely cracking the thousand-yard barrier (1,048 yards was the lowest total of his career). That does not mean he is fading, and an improved supporting cast would help him return to his rightful place as one of the best receivers in the game.

JJ MCCARTHY
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

The Vikings will remain patient with McCarthy – his numbers from last year look terrible, but he only played in 10 games and he still has great potential. Adding another target in Jauan Jennings should help, and with only a fading Kyler Murray as competition, he will be given his chances this year.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Vikings did not make the playoffs last year, but they made a pretty impressive charge at the end of the season, winning their last five games. This was mostly due to an inspired effort from the defense, which held opponents to just over 10 points per game over that spell, but the streak also saw the best performances from JJ McCarthy.

The dominant run started with a shutout of the Redskins, and the defense only allowed serious points (26) in their week 15 win over the Cowboys. They then cranked up the pressure, allowing 13, 10 and three points over their final three games.

At the same time, McCarthy was not exactly tearing it up, but he was starting to look competent. His completion percentage was 64.3 over the four games he played in the five-game winning streak, and he threw five touchdowns as opposed to just two interceptions. Over his six earlier starts he had completed just 54.1 percent of his throws and tossed 10 interceptions. The question is, was that enough for the team to keep faith in him for another year?

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

ATLANTA FALCONS

The Falcons have overhauled their front office, but what about their roster?

The Falcons are a team stuck in neutral. In seven of the last eight seasons they have won either seven or eight games, and the frustrating part is that for the past few seasons those mediocre records were almost enough to win the NFC South.

But nearly is not good enough in the NFL, and Raheem Morris has paid the price for failing to get his team over the hump. He is out and former Browns coach Kevin Stefanski is in. In fact, there is a whole new power base at the team with Stefanski joined by a new GM in Ian Cunningham, and Falcons legend Matt Ryan taking on the role of president of football.

There is a lot for the new triumvirate to put right – the Falcons did little well in 2025. There are big questions surrounding Michael Penix, who did not impress in his second season, and if it wasn't for Bijan Robinson it is difficult to see what identity the Falcons offense would have. New coordinator Tommy Rees will hope to turn things around.

The team has done next to nothing in free agency – the two biggest contracts they handed out went to a kicker and a punter, but Jawaan Taylor does add some experience at offensive tackle. After trading up to get James Pearce in last year's draft, Atlanta did not have a first-rounder this time around and had to wait until the 48th pick to add some badly needed talent. Avieon Terrell, the brother of Falcons corner AJ Terrell Jr, should slot in as the nickel corner right away, while Zachariah Branch brings blazing speed (4.35 in the 40) if not size (he is only 5'9" and 177 pounds) to the receiving corps.

> "The team has done next to nothing in free agency – the two biggest contracts went to a kicker and a punter"

ESTABLISHED **1965**

HEAD COACH **KEVIN STEFANSKI**

STADIUM **MERCEDES-BENZ STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **NEW ORLEANS SAINTS**

2025 RECORD **8-9**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.465**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1980, 1998, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2016

CONFERENCE

1998, 2016

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BIJAN ROBINSON**

DOB: **30 JANUARY 2002** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **7**

Robinson was as good as ever as a rusher last season, which is to say he is the best in the game – and in an era of great running backs that really means something. What made his 2025 campaign stand out was the big jump he made as a receiver. He almost doubled his receiving yardage compared to 2024, ripping off 820 yards on 79 receptions.

One of the most elusive players in the game, he led the league in missed tackles last year with 112, and his 2,298 yards from scrimmage were 172 more than Christian McCaffrey, who finished second in the category. Dubbed 'the human joystick' for his unpredictable moves and explosive ability, it is expected that he could be even better in Kevin Stefanski's wide-zone running scheme.

KEY PERSONNEL

JESSIE BATES III
SAFETY

© Getty Images

Bates has given the Falcons everything they wanted after signing him in free agency. In each of his three seasons in Atlanta he has returned an interception for a touchdown, and he was close to 100 tackles again last year. He has started 51 of 51 games with the Falcons.

MICHAEL PENIX
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

An ACL injury cut short an erratic sophomore campaign, and if Penix isn't ready to start the season, Tua Tagovailoa will step in. It is the third ACL injury suffered by Penix over his career, and there are now serious doubts that he can ever live up to his potential.

BRANDON DORLUS
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Dorlus was a very pleasant surprise for the Falcons last year. After appearing in just two games as a rookie in 2024, he made nine starts last year and tallied 8.5 sacks. He thrived in defensive line coach Nate Ollie's attacking scheme, as the Falcons set a franchise record for sacks, with 57.

KYLE PITTS
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

After a brilliant rookie season, Pitts had turned into a fairly ordinary tight end, but last year he was back close to his best, with career-highs in receptions (88) and touchdowns (five). He once more looks like one of the most dynamic players at the position.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

In week six, the Falcons looked like they were genuine contenders. Against a powerful Buffalo team, Atlanta jumped out to a 14-7 lead and as they prepared to start another drive, the TV commentators emphasised how important it was for the Bills defense to get a stop. Atlanta had put together two impressive drives, but were starting out at their 14-yard line after a punt. What happened next was stunning. After an offsides penalty negated a Joey Bosa sack, Bijan Robinson took a handoff. Seconds later he was running into the end zone having shredded the Buffalo defense for an 81-yard touchdown.

The run showcased Robinson's patience as he waited for a hole to develop. Once he made his cut, he was decisive – the hole was not big, but he burst through it with authority. Only Cole Bishop had a chance to stop him, but as Robinson turned on the afterburners, Bishop's desperation dive failed to bring him down.

Shockingly, the Falcons lost seven of their next eight games to fall out of contention, but for one week at least, they looked like potential champions.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

CAROLINA PANTHERS

In a weak division, the Panthers have a chance to repeat as champions

The Panthers were one of the most unimpressive division champions in recent memory, but the weakness of the NFC South gives them an opportunity to build on their unlikely title and establish dominance.

Much will depend on continued improvement from quarterback Bryce Young. A disaster early in his career, he turned things around enough for the team to pick up his fifth-year option this past offseason. That doesn't mean he is good enough as things stand, but it does mean that if he continues to improve at the same rate shown each season so far (59.8, 60.9 and 63.6 completion percentages over his first three campaigns, along with 11, 15 and 23 touchdowns) he will become a genuinely viable quarterback and the front office will be patting themselves on the back for showing patience.

But a lot of work needs to be done. Last year the Panthers were below average in many statistical categories and thoroughly average in the win-loss column. Losing Rico Dowdle in free agency was a blow, and the Panthers will almost certainly look to pick up someone when camp cuts begin, but Chuba Hubbard should be more effective this year if the injury bug doesn't make a return visit.

Offseason efforts have, perhaps surprisingly, zeroed in on the defense, with edge Jaelan Phillips and linebacker Devin Lloyd joining in free agency. The draft saw the team add depth rather than guaranteed starters, with offensive tackle Monroe Freeling and defensive tackle Lee Hunter both solid prospects, but also both joining deep units.

Chris Brazzell II, a third-round pick, is an intriguing mix of height and speed and that could be a very interesting combination to see in action.

> "Losing Rico Dowdle was a blow, and the Panthers will likely look to pick up someone when camp cuts begin"

ESTABLISHED **1993**

HEAD COACH **DAVE CANALES**

STADIUM
BANK OF AMERICA STADIUM

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **ATLANTA FALCONS**

2025 RECORD **8-9**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.521**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1996, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2025

CONFERENCE
2003, 2015

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **TETAIROA MCMILLAN**

DOB: **5 APRIL 2003** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **4**

McMillan was viewed by many as the top receiver prospect in the 2025 draft and he did not disappoint after the Panthers took him eighth overall. His superb rookie campaign (70 catches for 1,014 yards) was just what the team needed as they try to evaluate Bryce Young – and it was also a welcome change of direction after they whiffed on Xavier Legette and Jonathan Mingo with high picks in the previous two drafts.

Words like 'smooth' and 'surgical' are bandied about when describing McMillan's style of play, and his productivity was all the more impressive given that Young is still developing at quarterback.

The 2025 NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year should continue to give Young a viable target in his second year, and it appears as if the sky is the limit for McMillan.

KEY PERSONNEL

JAELAN PHILLIPS
EDGE

© Getty Images

The Panthers are hoping that Phillips can rediscover his early-career form, when he had 15.5 sacks and 41 quarterback hits in his first two seasons. He was a shadow of that player last year, notching just five sacks and 14 QB hits, but the Panthers are paying him like an All-Pro.

BRYCE YOUNG
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

In today's NFL, Young is lucky to be going into his fourth season with the team that drafted him – he was nothing more than average last year... but that was an achievement after his terrible start. There is still hope he can become a franchise player, but this season will be make-or-break.

CHUBA HUBBARD
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Hubbard's 1,195-yard, 10-touchdown effort in 2024 earned him a nice contract extension, but last year was spoiled by a calf injury and he never really hit his stride. He still contributed 734 combined yards and can expect to see considerably more work this season.

NIC SCOURTON
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Scourton turned in a highly commendable rookie season for a second-round draftee, appearing in all 17 games, starting eight, and registering 47 tackles, five sacks, seven tackles for loss and nine QB hits. It's early days still, but he looks like a potential star at the position.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Panthers were average on defense, but one thing they were relatively good at was picking the ball off – their 15 interceptions ranked eighth among NFL defenses. Leading the way was fifth-year cornerback Jaycee Horn, who picked opposing quarterbacks off five times, the best mark of his career.

Horn's performance is not that surprising when you consider that he can catch the ball like Odell Beckham Jr... at least on occasions. Against the Jaguars in the first week of the season, Horn made an interception for the ages when Trevor Lawrence looked deep on a second-and-24 play.

Jacksonville had scored four times on their first six possessions, and their confidence was high. Lawrence probably thought he had put enough on the ball to drop it in over Horn, and Travis Hunter was waiting to turn the pass into a huge gain, until Horn stretched out one hand to pluck the ball out of the air. The play showcased Horn's tremendous athleticism, as he was backpedalling on the play before leaping into the air and spinning to make the grab.

© Getty Images

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Saints are hoping to start this season like they finished the last one

A miserable 1-8 start to the season meant that the Saint's 2025 campaign was over by early November, and that would usually herald an overhaul of the coaching staff. But a funny thing happened over the second half of the season – New Orleans became competitive, winning four straight games at one point to lift their final record to an encouraging (given that terrible start) 6-11.

The main cause for optimism going into a new year is the encouraging play of quarterback Tyler Shough. After Spencer Rattler had guided the Saints to just one win in his eight starts, Shough managed five wins in nine starts and had some truly memorable days. Do the Saints have their next franchise quarterback?

The team is looking to provide more options for their young signal-caller. Last year, a fading Alvin Kamara was the best they could offer at running back, so free agency has brought in former Jaguar Travis Etienne, who has rushed for a thousand yards in three of his four pro seasons. In the draft, Jordyn Tyson was the top-rated receiver on some boards and he joined with the eighth pick of the first round.

Improved protection for Shough was also a priority, hence the signing of the versatile David Edwards, who has played both guard positions during spells with the Rams and Bills. Pass-protection is considered his forte.

On defense, the Saints are bringing back linebacker Kaden Ellis, who blossomed into a full-time starter in Atlanta over the last three years. He's a tackling machine and will go some way to softening the blow of losing veteran leader Demario Davis to the Jets. The Saints also brought in Christen Miller, a disruptive defensive tackle, via the draft.

> "The main cause for optimism going into a new year is the encouraging play of quarterback Tyler Shough"

ESTABLISHED **1966**

HEAD COACH **KELLEN MOORE**

STADIUM
CAESARS SUPERDOME

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **ATLANTA FALCONS**

2025 RECORD **6-11**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.434**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1991, 2000, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

CONFERENCE
2009

LEAGUE
2009

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **CHASE YOUNG**

DOB: **14 APRIL 1999** POS: **EDGE** NO. **99**

Young always had the ability, but a variety of factors prevented his career from taking off. Topping the list was an ACL injury in his second year, and after disappointing stints in Washington and San Francisco saw him wash up in New Orleans, he required neck surgery and made no starts in 2024.

Last season, he showed glimpses of what he could become. He missed the first five games with a calf injury, but then started the final 12. That was cause enough for optimism (he had 15 starts in the previous four seasons combined) but even more encouraging were the 10 sacks he piled up. It was the best season of his career, and the hope is that he can avoid the injury bug and become a consistent contributor.

KEY PERSONNEL

TYLER SHOUGH
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Saints fans are hoping that Shough quickly develops into the team's star player, but he has work to do. He flashed real ability and the key now will be to build on that strong start when NFL defenses have film on him and are better able to prepare for him.

TRAVIS ETIENNE
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

A strong running game can make life much easier for a quarterback and Etienne is a quality player, producing 3,798 yards in his four seasons with Jacksonville. He's a valuable receiver too, and he hasn't been run into the ground, so he should be entering his prime during his new four-year contract.

CHRIS OLAVE
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Slightly suspect hands keep Olave out of the top flight of NFL receivers, but he is an elite route-runner and he is still young enough (only 26 going into this season) to polish up his catching ability. He also needs to work on his contested catches, but he is Tyler Shough's top target.

JONAS SANKER
SAFETY

© Getty Images

Sanker was considered a steal when the Saints snagged him with the 93rd overall pick in the 2025 draft, and he has not disappointed. He played at a Pro Bowl level last year and once he becomes better known he should start to pile up the accolades.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Tyler Shough was a high-percentage passer in most of his starts (he had games where he completed 68.4, 69.8 and 70.4 percent of his passes) but in the last game of the Saints' unlikely four-game winning streak he was off the charts.

Against Tennessee, he connected on 22 of 27 passes, good for an 81.5 percent completion rate. His two touchdowns and no interceptions brought home a 142.7 passer rating, by far his best of the year, leading commentators to ponder whether the Saints had their quarterback of the future.

Shough's day started slowly – he was sacked on his second attempted pass and could only lead the Saints to a field goal in the first half, their only touchdown coming on a fumble return by Chase Young. In the second half, he opened up, completing passes of 30, 39, 32 and 60 yards as well as his two scoring passes as the Saints won a thriller, 34-26.

As well as overturning a 13-point deficit, the win was especially sweet as Shough, the 40th overall pick in the 2025 draft, had outperformed the No.1 pick, Cam Ward.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

Mediocrity may no longer be enough in the NFC South

In four seasons under Todd Bowles, the Bucs have been a decent team, but have been bailed out by the relative weakness of their divisional opponents. In Bowles' first three campaigns, the Bucs won the AFC South with win totals of eight, nine and 10, but last year the streak came to an end when their 8-9 tally was not enough to win a division that did not feature a single team with a winning record.

More worrying was the manner in which the team collapsed at the midway point, slipping from a 6-2 contender to an 8-9 also-ran. Changes were inevitable and Zac Robinson is in as the new offensive coordinator, while George Edwards steps in as defensive coordinator, a position that Bowles filled himself last year. Edwards has some tools to work with, including a young and talented secondary,

One of the problems on the team is the absence of true superstar talent – they did not have a thousand-yard rusher, thousand-yard receiver or double-digit sack artist last year. Steps have been taken. In free agency, the Bucs took a chance that Kenneth Gainwell is ready to break out after five modest seasons at running back for the Eagles and Steelers.

On defense, the Bucs took another flyer on Al-Quadin Muhammad, who turned in a career year with 11 sacks last season. He will join top draft pick Rueben Bain Jr in a revamped and potentially effective pass rush.

In what looks at first glance to be a good draft for the Bucs, linebacker Josiah Trotter was added in the second round. He's a tackling machine who will attempt to step into the shoes of the retired Lavonte David.

> "One of the problems on the team is the absence of true superstar talent"

ESTABLISHED **1974**

HEAD COACH **TODD BOWLES**

STADIUM **RAYMOND JAMES STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **CAROLINA PANTHERS**

2025 RECORD **8-9**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.491**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1979, 1981, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
2002, 2020

LEAGUE
2002, 2020

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BAKER MAYFIELD**

DOB: **14 APRIL 1995** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **6**

Mayfield has developed into a sparkplug of a player, the kind of quarterback who can inspire his team by example. Last year he fell off noticeably from a high point in 2024, and he had some very poor outings in the Bucs' 2-7 run to close out the campaign (he completed less than half of his passes in losses to the Rams and Saints).

Much of that was down to a shoulder strain that Mayfield played through, and the hope is he will look more like his usual self after an offseason of recovery. He will miss the comforting presence of Mike Evans, who has jumped ship to the 49ers, but draftee Ted Hurst (who stands 6'4", although he doesn't come close to the bulk of Evans) at least gives him a promising new target.

KEY PERSONNEL

EMEKA EGBUKA
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Egbuka enjoyed a terrific rookie season. One of the seemingly endless list of talented wideouts to come out of Ohio State in recent years, he only just failed to register a thousand yards in his rookie campaign, after snagging 63 passes and scoring six touchdowns.

TRISTAN WIRFS
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Wirfs started the season on crutches after offseason knee surgery, but once back in the line-up he was once more arguably the best left tackle in the game. The only player ever to be named First-team All-Pro at both left tackle and right tackle, he is a foundational piece in the Bucs offense.

TYKEE SMITH
SAFETY

© Getty Images

Smith is an emerging force in the secondary, viewed as one of the toughest players on the unit. This was borne out when he played through a painful shoulder injury last year on his way to 100 combined tackles. If the injury bug stays away, he should become a real leader in the defensive backfield.

RUEBEN BAIN JR
EDGE

© Getty Images

Few players have been subjected to greater scrutiny than the Bucs' first-round draft pick, whose arms were the subject of intense debate. Some pundits claimed he could not be a dominant pass-rusher with arms that are 'only' 30 and seven-eighths inches long, but the Bucs had no doubts.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Before the bye-week, the Buccaneers were a force to be reckoned with, and week two stood out as testimony to the team's resilience. Trailing the Texans 19-14, the Bucs were in a big hole. With just 1:24 left in the game, they faced a fourth-and-10 at their own 32-yard line after Baker Mayfield had just missed a long connection with Emeka Egbuka.

Even though they had all three timeouts left, they chose to go for it on fourth down, making it a do-or-die moment. Mayfield dropped back and was engulfed by Texans pass-rushers, somehow evading them all and bursting up the middle of the field for a 15-yard gain.

Having kept the game alive with his feet, Mayfield proceeded to set up a win with his arm, hitting Cade Otton (eight yards), Bucky Irving (22 and five yards), Mike Evans (11 yards) and Otton again (five yards) to take the Bucs down to Houston's two-yard line with just nine seconds left. Rachaad White then scored the winning touchdown to lift Tampa Bay to 2-0 on their way to a 6-2 start.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

ARIZONA CARDINALS

Weak on offense and defense, the Cards could only address so much in one offseason

You have to wonder how it feels to be the Cardinals, stuck in a division with three powerhouse franchises. Arizona has managed just one winning season in the last 10, and they finished bottom of the NFC West in three of the last four. To make matters worse, their former Pro Bowl quarterback has fallen from grace and the team is looking at a complete reset.

Mike LaFleur, an offensive-minded coach, now holds the reins, and he has some tools to work with, most notably a productive tight end in Trey McBride and a potentially great (and young) receiver pairing in Michael Wilson and Marvin Harrison Jr. Some kind of running option was desperately needed – no Cardinals player managed 350 rushing yards last year. Enter first-round draft pick Jeremiyah Love, one of the most highly rated running backs to come out of the college game for a while. He will give the offense an identity while they wait for their new franchise quarterback, who (the Cards hope) will be joining via next year's draft.

The fact remains though, that Arizona's defense is terrible, and not much has been done to help here. Defensive tackle Roy Lopez has returned after a year in Detroit, but he is not an impact player, while safety Jalen Thompson has departed, leaving a hole in the secondary. The Cards will be hoping Josh Sweat turns things up a notch after a promising first season in Arizona.

Jack Gibbens, who joins from New England, is a high-energy linebacker who may be able to step up in a new environment, but it looks like a team in flux will have to wait until next year to properly address its defense.

> "The fact remains that Arizona's defense is terrible, and not much has been done to help here"

ESTABLISHED **1898**

HEAD COACH **MIKE LAFLEUR**

STADIUM **STATE FARM STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**

2025 RECORD **3-14**

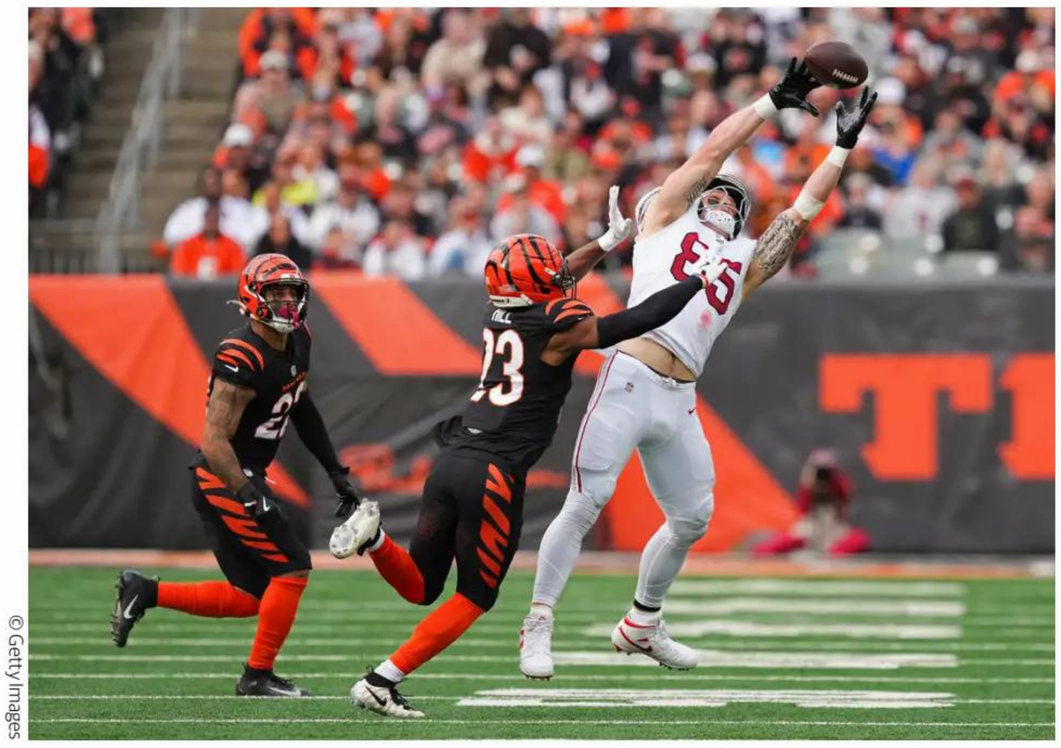
2026 SCHEDULE **0.538**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1947, 1948, 1974, 1975, 2008, 2009, 2015

CONFERENCE
2008

LEAGUE
1925, 1947


© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **TREY MCBRIDE**

DOB: **22 NOVEMBER 1999** POS: **TIGHT END** NO. **85**

McBride was our pick for the Cardinals' star player last season, and we see no reason to change our minds after he posted even better stats in 2025. His receptions (126), yards (1,239) and touchdowns (11) all saw improvements from 2024, and he ranked sixth in the league in receiving yards – not among tight ends, among all players. No other tight end cracked the thousand-yard barrier last season. McBride also set an NFL record for the most consecutive games with five or more catches by a tight end, with 16.

Despite his competitive nature, he is keeping his feet on the ground, refusing to accept that he is the best at his position, but a couple more seasons like his last will make that difficult to deny.

KEY PERSONNEL

MIKE LAFLEUR
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

LaFleur gets his chance after impressing as offensive coordinator with the Rams. He has gained experience from the likes of Kyle Shanahan and Sean McVay and is considered one of the brightest offensive minds in the game. He could be just what is needed to bring hope back to a forlorn franchise.

MICHAEL WILSON
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Wilson made huge strides in his third season, almost doubling his receiving yardage compared to 2024. With Marvin Harrison Jr expected to be the Cardinals' top receiver, it was instead Wilson who upped his game, despite playing with a journeyman quarterback in Jacoby Brissett.

JOSH SWEAT
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Sweat joined Arizona on a big free-agent contract and had a good campaign, collecting 12 sacks (the best mark of his career). In his second year in the desert, the Cardinals will hope for more impact plays in crunch time, as he tended to be quiet in the fourth quarter.

JEREMIYAH LOVE
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Built in the mould of Reggie Bush, Love should get plenty of work in his first season, both as a rusher and as a receiver, and his 4.36 speed makes him a home-run threat on every touch. He may even line up out wide on occasion, as the Cards suddenly have a lot of options at running back.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

After a promising 2-0 start to the campaign, the Cards lost five games in a row by a combined 13 points. A win against the Cowboys was then followed by another losing skid, this time extending to nine games as their season spiralled out of control.

Amid the gloom, however, a bright glimmer emerged. Michael Wilson, who had been plodding his way through an unremarkable campaign (22 catches in the first nine games) suddenly caught fire. He made 56 catches over the remaining eight games, as he struck up an unlikely partnership with Jacoby Brissett. His remarkable streak began with a 15-catch effort against the 49ers. The 15 grabs were good for 185 yards – the first hundred-yard game of Wilson's career, and he added two more centuries over the next three games.

His heroics were in vain, as Arizona finished with a dismal 3-14 record, but the emergence of a bona fide receiver gives new coach Mike LaFleur something to work with in his first year at the helm, and something for Cardinals fans to be hopeful about.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

LOS ANGELES RAMS

The Rams look like a serious contender once more... so what else is new?

It's easy to look at the Rams and see only the best offense in the NFL. Sean McVay is legitimately hailed as a genius and with Matthew Stafford defying the years at quarterback, Los Angeles will always be in the conversation when offensive fireworks are discussed.

But this team also has a good defense, and that combination took them to the brink of the Super Bowl again last year. For two straight campaigns the Rams have fallen to the team that ultimately won the championship, and their mission now is to find a way past Seattle.

You can't do much to improve the league's top-ranked offense, so the priorities were to add more defensive talent (the unit fell off towards the end of the year) and improve on special teams. That played out as the team made cornerback Jaylen Watson their big free-agency acquisition and added Trent McDuffie via trade, completely revamping the cornerback room.

For a while, that seemed to be the end of the defensive makeover. The Rams confounded the experts by selecting Alabama quarterback Ty Simpson in the first round of the draft, when a pass-rusher like Rueben Bain might have provided a more immediate impact. Drafting Simpson may turn out to be a stroke of genius if Stafford retires after one or two more seasons and Simpson is ready to step in, but the Rams were so close last year it was assumed they would get someone else to help this season... and then they pulled off a stunning trade for Cleveland's Myles Garrett to once more enter win-now mode. The Rams must now be the early favourites for Super Bowl LXI.

> "The Rams pulled off a stunning trade for Cleveland's Myles Garrett to once more enter win-now mode"

ESTABLISHED **1936**

HEAD COACH **SEAN MCVAY**

STADIUM **SOFI STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**

2025 RECORD **12-5**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.516**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1945, 1949, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1985, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2017, 2018, 2021, 2024

CONFERENCE

1950, 1951, 1955, 1979, 1999, 2001, 2018, 2021

LEAGUE

1945, 1951, 1999, 2021

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **MYLES GARRETT**

DOB: **29 DECEMBER 1995** POS: **DEFENSIVE END** NO. **95**

★ **Anyone who thought Garrett might tail off after securing his huge deal in the last offseason was forced to think again as he terrorised offenses all year.** Garrett is always capable of taking over a game, but his consistency is also remarkable. He now has 125.5 sacks in 134 regular season appearances, and he has recorded double-digit sacks in eight straight seasons.

Garrett's commitment to the Browns was always conditional. He had repeatedly said that he could accept losing if the team was trying to win, but was not onboard with a rebuild. The Browns clearly thought it was time to trade their biggest asset for as much as they could get, and his arrival in Los Angeles has the Rams dreaming of another title.

KEY PERSONNEL

MATTHEW STAFFORD
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

At the age of 37, Stafford won his first NFL MVP Award last season. It was a stunning campaign and the Rams are hoping he can keep going for at least one or two more years (he has only committed to one more at the moment). His 4,707 yards and 46 touchdowns were both league-leading marks.

PUKA NACUA
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Incredible as it is when you consider Stafford's brilliant campaign, he has a rival for the accolade of best player on the Rams offense. Nacua has 4,191 yards in his first three seasons and brings a physicality to the receiver position that is rare, excelling as a run blocker as well.

BYRON YOUNG
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Young has done more than the Rams could have dreamed of as a third-round draft pick in 2023, emerging as a star on a strong unit. Career highs in tackles (82), sacks (12) and QB hits (29) mean the Rams will have to spend to keep him after this season.

JAYLEN WATSON
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

Watson established himself as an emerging player in Kansas City last year (he started 15 games) and the Rams clearly believe in him after handing out a three-year, $51 million contract. He excels in run support and will bring some physicality to the Rams' secondary.

© Getty Images

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Rams can take pride from pushing the eventual champion Seahawks so close in all three of their games (the Rams won one and lost two), but the most excitement generated all year must have come from the overtime playoff victory against Chicago.

It was far from a pretty win – the usually dominant Rams offense had amassed just 174 yards going into the final quarter, and the Bears had proved resilient, forcing overtime with a stunning touchdown from Caleb Williams to Cole Kmet.

But really good teams find a way to win ugly games, and LA's fans could take pleasure from the way their defense stood up when needed. The offense sputtered and failed to score on the opening drive of overtime, so any score by the Bears would win the game. They drove into Rams territory as the tension built... but then Williams went deep for DJ Moore and was intercepted by safety Kamren Curl at the Rams' 22.

Nine plays later, Stafford had moved the ball into field goal range and Harrison Mevis duly slotted the 42-yarder that sent LA to the NFC Championship Game.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

A pass-rush lacking bite could be the Niners' Achilles heel once more this season

© Getty Images

In some divisions, the Niners would be the dominant force, but they have the extreme misfortune of sharing a division with two other powerhouses, and until they find a way past the Rams and Seahawks their seasons are likely to end like the last one. Making the playoffs and winning a game would be enough to make some fans happy, but not those in San Francisco.

Last season was marked by a rash of injuries, perhaps the most devastating being that suffered by tight end George Kittle in the postseason. His Achilles tear will see him miss a significant part of the coming season. Brock Purdy missed eight games with a turf toe injury, Nick Bosa tore his ACL and Fred Warner is still recovering from a broken and dislocated ankle. Those are big names and big question marks.

In order to overhaul their divisional rivals, the 49ers must do something to improve the league's worst pass-rush. The return of Bosa will help, but he may take a while to get back up to speed. The only significant free agent addition on defense saw the return of linebacker Dre Greenlaw – but he's no pass-rusher, having just 4.5 sacks in his seven seasons. Draftee Romello Height has some moves, but he was considered a reach by many even in the third round.

The Niners instead chose to revamp the receiver room, and that makes sense for a team that traditionally relies on its offense and has been leaning too heavily on running back Christian McCaffrey. Former Buc Mike Evans (free agency) and Ole Miss receiver De'Zhaun Stribling (second-round draft pick) should add some juice to a unit that still really misses Brandon Aiyuk.

> "The Niners chose to revamp the receiver room, and that makes sense for a team that relies on its offense"

ESTABLISHED **1944**

HEAD COACH **KYLE SHANAHAN**

STADIUM **LEVI'S STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **LOS ANGELES RAMS**

2025 RECORD **12-5**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.497**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1970, 1971, 1972, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2011, 2012, 2019, 2022, 2023

CONFERENCE

1981, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2012, 2019, 2023

LEAGUE

1981, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1994

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY**

DOB: **7 JUNE 1996** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **23**

McCaffery was named the NFL's Comeback Player of the Year for the first time last season (he missed 13 games in 2024) and came agonisingly close to recording 1,000 yards rushing and receiving in the same season for the second time in his career.

Running backs typically tail off at the age of 30, but if anyone can stave off Father Time for a while longer, it is McCaffrey, who has an insane work ethic. For now, he remains the heartbeat of the offense.

McCaffrey also has unbelievable consistency. While some players mix explosive days with quiet ones, McCaffrey offers steady production. Last year he became the first running back to ever start a season with six consecutive games with at least 50 yards receiving (his streak finally ended at seven games).

KEY PERSONNEL

BROCK PURDY
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

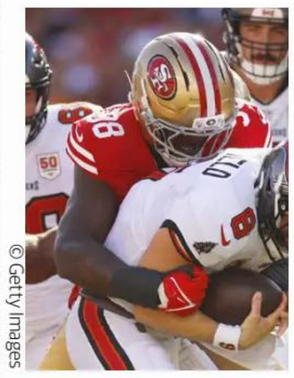
Mac Jones was steady when Purdy was injured last year, but the Niners know they will not reach the highest heights unless their top gun is at the controls. A purple patch at the end of last season (11 touchdowns in three games from week 15 to week 17) propelled San Francisco into the postseason.

FRED WARNER
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Warner is the spiritual leader of the 49ers defense, and his recovery from a serious ankle injury is crucial to their hopes this year. He returned to practice at the tail end of last season and says he is feeling just like his old self... which should mean he'll register something like 130 tackles.

MYKEL WILLIAMS
DEFENSIVE END


© Getty Images

If Williams can rebound from his ACL injury and live up to his draft status, he could go a long way to boosting the 49ers pass-rush. New defensive coordinator Raheem Morris will utilise him from the three-technique spot on the interior of the defensive line on clear passing downs.

MIKE EVANS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Evans opened his career with 11 straight 1,000-yard receiving seasons, before managing just 368 last year. The Niners clearly believe he has a lot left in the tank, judging by his new three-year, $42 million contract. If he can avoid the injury bug that derailed his 2025 campaign, he will produce.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Week 17 featured a thrilling clash of contenders, with both the 49ers and the Bears coming in with 11-4 records. Time and again the Niners moved into a lead, and time and again the Bears reeled them back in, until the score was tied at 28-28 with just over five minutes remaining in the third quarter.

Facing a first-and-goal from the Chicago six-yard line, Purdy changed the play at the line and just beat the play clock as it ticked down to zero. Faking a hand-off to Brian Robinson, Purdy then rolled out to the left and came under heavy pressure. First he ducked back out of the reach of Austin Booker, then he jinked forward between Booker and Andrew Billings, before lofting a soft pass to Kyle Juszczyk, who was all alone in the end zone. It was a masterful display of calm and poise under intense pressure.

"That play is so good," enthused NBC's play-by-play announcer, Mike Tirico. "You've got great players out there, great athletes, and he's like he's in the playground."

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

Can the Seahawks stay at the top of the NFL tree this year?

As soon as a team wins the Super Bowl, there are questions over whether they have what it takes to repeat. The Seahawks might already have won back-to-back titles in 2013-14, if Russell Wilson hadn't thrown an interception when everyone was screaming for the ball to be handed to Marshawn Lynch in Super Bowl XLIX. They might go one better this time.

Seattle's Super Bowl season was built on a resurgent defense, which ranked first in points allowed for the first time since the days of the Legion of Boom. There was capable support from an offense led by Sam Darnold (who proved his 2024 season with the Vikings was no fluke) and a great one-two running back punch from Kenneth Walker III and Zach Charbonnet. Walker has left in free agency but has been replaced by first-round draft pick Jadarian Price.

But it was the defense that paced the Seahawks, and rather than having one or two dominant players, it was very much a team effort. Three players shared the team lead with a modest seven sacks each, while 10 players managed to make at least one interception.

As is often the case with Super Bowl winners, the Seahawks were pillaged in free agency. As well as losing Walker, edge Boye Mafe, safety Coby Bryant and corner Tariq Woolen all signed deals elsewhere. With the team choosing to concentrate on re-signing its own players in free agency (wideout Rashid Shaheed and corner Josh Jobe got the biggest deals), it was left to the draft to plug gaps. Second-rounder Bud Clark is a ballhawk at safety, while third-round corner Julian Neal has the sort of size (6'2", 203 pounds) to rekindle fond memories of the Legion of Boom.

> **"As is often the case with Super Bowl winners, the Seahawks were pillaged in free agency"**

ESTABLISHED **1974**

HEAD COACH **MIKE MACDONALD**

STADIUM **LUMEN FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**

2025 RECORD **14-3**

2026 SCHEDULE **0.514**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION
1988, 1999, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2020, 2025

CONFERENCE
2005, 2013, 2014, 2025

LEAGUE
2013, 2025

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA**

DOB: **14 FEBRUARY 2002** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **11**

★ **Seattle's defense might not have an outstanding star, but its offense most certainly does.** JSN was the best receiver in football last year, making 119 receptions for 1,793 yards and 10 touchdowns. He got better as the season progressed, going over the 100-yard mark five times in the last 11 regular season games.

Smith-Njigba didn't exactly have a quiet start to his career, but he was behind two established veterans in DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett when he first arrived in Seattle. With their departures, he became the focal point of the Seahawks passing game and he did not disappoint.

The AP Offensive Player of the Year is not the tallest, strongest or fastest receiver in the game, but his route-running is elite, allowing him to gain the separation that makes him so dangerous.

KEY PERSONNEL

ERNEST JONES
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Last year, Jones was the same tackling machine he has been for most of his career (he made 126 combined tackles), but he added a new string to his bow with five interceptions, one of which he returned for a touchdown. He was voted Second-team All-Pro for his efforts.

BYRON MURPHY
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Alongside Leonard Williams, Murphy gives the Seahawks one of the best tackle pairings in the game. Just 23 years of age, Murphy had seven sacks and 62 tackles in his second season, after becoming a full-time starter – identical numbers to his partner in crime. Both players are former first-round draft picks.

MIKE MACDONALD
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

Macdonald has put the Seahawks back on top, piecing together the best defense in football in his second season at the helm. He was a risk when Seattle hired him at the age of 36 (he only had two years' experience as a coordinator) but now the future seems set in Seattle.

JADARIAN PRICE
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

It's not often that two running backs from the same university get drafted in the first round, but Price joined fellow Notre Dame alum Jeremiyah Love as top picks. He isn't as polished as his former college teammate, but he should be a workhorse on first and second downs.

2025

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Seattle's Super Bowl triumph is covered elsewhere in this magazine, so although that was undoubtedly the highlight of their season, let's look elsewhere...

The NFC Championship Game was an incredibly tense affair, and the Seahawks could easily have found themselves eliminated at the hands of a potent Rams team. Two of the top quarterbacks in the game went toe-to-toe, combining for more than 700 passing yards and six touchdowns as the NFC's heavyweights traded blows.

Seattle took a four-point lead into the final quarter after Sam Darnold threw three touchdowns in just over 10 minutes of game time. The contest then came down to a hair-raising fourth-quarter drive by the Rams, where they took 12 plays to get to the Seahawks' six-yard line... but could get no further as the Seattle defense rose up to stop them on three straight plays to regain possession.

There was still work to do, with almost five minutes remaining, but a careful drive bled the clock almost dry, and a Michael Dickson punt pinned the Rams on their own seven-yard line. Seattle were heading to the Super Bowl.

© Getty Images

★ The Seahawks celebrate after their 29-13 victory over the Patriots at Super Bowl LX

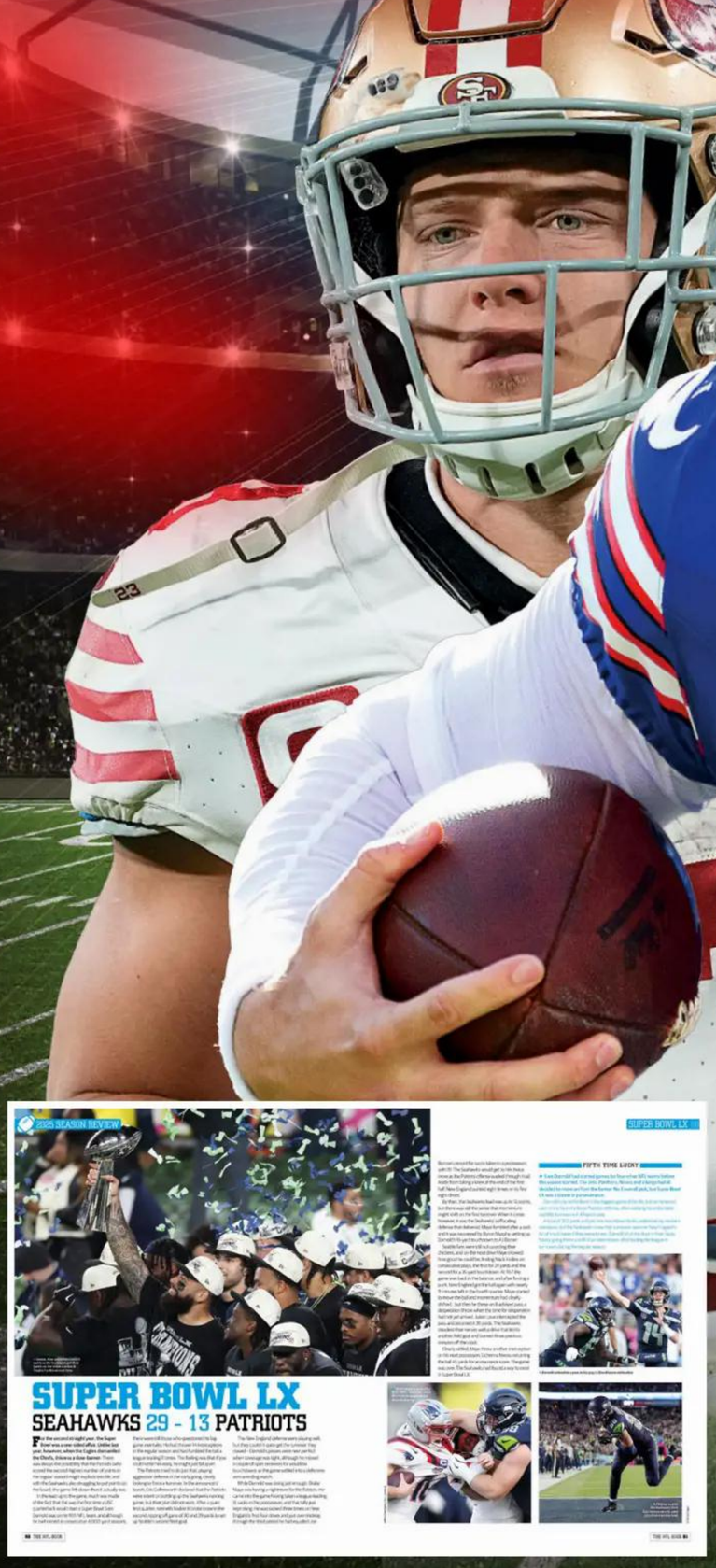
© Getty Images

© Getty Images

★★★ THE NFL BOOK

★ The ultimate guide to everything football ★

All 32 NFL teams profiled



The Super Bowl

All the info you need on the greatest sporting show on Earth

MEET THE TEAMS
BUFFALO BILLS
A new stadium and head coach mark the beginning of a new era in Buffalo
BUFFALO BILLS
STAR PLAYER JOSH ALLEN
KEY PERSONNEL
HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON
"Allen has led Buffalo to the postseason in seven straight seasons and is at the peak of his powers"

Meet the teams

Follow detailed breakdowns of every NFL team for the 2026 season

Greatest NFL players

Learn all about the best players in the history of the NFL